



SCRIOBH 7 - CONFINEMENT DOSSIER - 2020

"The artist always precedes the psychoanalyst" J. Lacan

In times of confinement and restriction of social interaction, we invited several artists from a diversity of fields to tell us about their experiences during the confinement measures at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. We put to them the following questions:

Q1 - *What is your experience, as an artist, of the impossibility to carry out cultural and artistic events 'in the flesh'? What is different when the audience / spectator is 'virtual'?*

Q2 - *In your particular form of art, what are the effects of the exclusion of the body in the encounter with the body of the other, i.e. what is different / new?
Can you relate this to the notion of 'presence' (can you -as an artist- do without physical presence?)*

We aim at learning from them, since we believe that their experiences and know-how can contribute to our thinking about subjectivity and about the analytic encounter.

K A T I E D O N O V A N

Katie Donovan is a poet. Originally from a farm in Co. Wexford, in the South East of Ireland, she lives in Dalkey, a suburb of Dublin. She has published five collections of poetry, all with Bloodaxe Books UK. Her most recent, "Off Duty" was shortlisted for the Poetry Now prize in 2017. She is a recipient of the Lawrence O'Shaughnessy Award for Irish Poetry. She has contributed to the best-selling anthology, "Staying Alive: real poems for unreal times" edited by Neil Astley and has given readings from her work at festivals, bookshops and universities both in Ireland and abroad.

She is a former journalist with "The Irish Times" newspaper and has taught Creative Writing in Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire and National University Ireland, Maynooth. She currently works as a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner (SEP) and Amatsu therapist.

She has two teenage children.

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Writing poetry, as I have done since I was a teenager, is an intensely solitary act and yet it expresses insights which I wish to share. All writers are conflicted in this way – we must create in isolation, but, when the time is right, we crave an audience. As I am completing a new collection, tentatively entitled “Loose Talk,” I am currently working in a bubble. I had been looking forward to a change in this intense focus, as I had been invited to give readings at two live events in March.



This would have been a welcome opportunity to try out some of my new work in a different context. Some of my new poems are about the importance of saving the planet from global warming and habitat destruction and one of the events I was to read at, was a loose gathering of like-minded souls. We were going to perform on the seafront in Dun Laoghaire, on Mother’s Day, to celebrate “Mother Earth” with speeches, music and poems. That had to be cancelled, along with the other event I was due to perform at, a reading with two other poets for “Mountains to Sea,” a literary festival held in my local borough (Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown). I was looking forward to the buzz that comes with performing with other poets – in this case, John McAuliffe, a Kerry-born poet whose work is very different from mine; and Nidhe Sak, a newcomer whose work I don’t know at all.

It is a welcome chance to see where one’s voice fits in to the huge spectrum that is contemporary poetry, in a very immediate way, when one performs with others. Poetry has its own small niche in the world of the arts and meeting other poets helps to confirm me in my path. We are all in this crazy business together and we all, each in our own way, have something of value to offer. Older poets like me can offer encouragement to youngsters, passing along the support I received myself when I was starting out.

There is also the relationship that can be established with the audience. I like standing on the stage, reading my work, feeling as though my whole being is giving voice to the words. The receptivity of the crowd can be felt in the air: welcoming, expectant, appreciative. Individual poems can elicit sighs of recognition or rounds of spontaneous applause. Part of me grows in that atmosphere, like a plant in the sun.

Afterwards, there is the engagement with those who seek individual chats and book signings. Sometimes people divulge personal information in response to what my work has revealed to them. My last collection, “Off Duty” was written in the aftermath of my husband’s long illness and eventual death, and I would often be approached after readings by others who had been through similar experiences. They expressed gratitude that some of the things they had felt and experienced were voiced in my work, especially the less “politically correct” aspects of caring for someone with a terminal disease. How, in truth, there are days when one sometimes just can’t wait for it all to be over, but stew in guilt at being “the survivor” too.

There is something very satisfying about watching an audience member clutching my book, brimming with things to tell me about it. This interaction helps me to have a new perspective on work that I have redrafted and pored over during a long period. Poets can find quite startling - but nonetheless valid - interpretations of their work from readers. I remember talking to the renowned Irish language poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill about her collection, "The Fifty Minute Mermaid." I likened the mermaid, whose tail has been surgically altered so that she can walk on two legs, to the experience of an amputee learning to walk with prosthetics, an experience endured by my father. Nuala was surprised and delighted by this new take on her mermaid poems. She had used the mermaid primarily as a symbol for native Irish speakers who had to cut out their language and learn to communicate through English.

After many consecutive live readings and "meet and greets," I do get tired however, and begin to feel empty inside, like a husk. That's when I need to withdraw and shelter in silence, unobserved. That's when I can create new work.

That does not mean total isolation however, even in these current times of having to stay at home. I have exchanged – by email - poems-in-the-making with poet friends. The resulting feedback is helpful, as I begin to lack the ability to judge a poem on which I've worked for perhaps too long.

I am also submitting more unpublished work than usual, mostly to journals and magazines, but also to competitions and radio programmes. This is partly because I have more time, as my day job as a therapist has been suspended. I find the process of submitting new work very time-consuming, so it tends to get put on the long finger. Now I have no excuse in that regard. But also, the lockdown, having forced me into a vacuum not of my own making, is a catalyst for wanting to reach out more, to potential audiences, by sending out work.

There have been many invitations from various poetry organisations to write about the pandemic and submit work, either in the form of a recording, or simply the text of a new poem. So far, I have not responded to those, as I'm still trying to figure out what I have to say – and more importantly, feel moved to say - about the virus and its repercussions. For me, poems are not like newspaper articles, to be commissioned and delivered by a deadline. I do know the difference, as I was a professional journalist for nearly 14 years.

Poetry Ireland has been sharing some archival recordings of poets reading poems, and when I saw one of mine on twitter, I experienced the usual pang of exposure. I braced myself and watched it and let out a sigh of relief that it was, after all, not too bad. I have never enjoyed looking at myself on a video recording – there is such a jolt, as if watching a stranger, who is actually the me that others see. It is a very different experience from the elation of giving a live performance!

However, some loyal tweeps have "liked" this recording, and there were some "shares". One positive result of the lockdown has been writers taking to social media to support each other. This is not the same as being together at a festival, but it is better than nothing. In fact, "Cuir," a literary festival in Galway, is going ahead as a virtual event this weekend (April 24th).

I am very much a poet of the body, but I think that's because most of the time I live in my head, finding the body very mysterious, a sort of frontier that I must explore. I have been criticised, belittled and celebrated for this recurring focus, which surprises me, as if I had any choice in the matter. Fashions come and go, but a writer's obsession does not waver. So that in my fumbling first attempts to write about this pandemic and its effects, I have started with how it feels, literally, to be anxious and apprehensive. My ribs and lungs tighten, as I wonder how those who have contracted the disease are managing, many stuck in isolation, dependent on ventilators, dying alone.

The introvert in me is comfortable with quiet lockdown time, as long as I can have islands of calm outside the daily news bulletins recording the lists of the dead, the blunders by government, and the heroism of our over-stretched medical workers. I can hug my children, stroke one of my five cats, work in the garden, or paddle in the sea (Whiterock beach is a ten-minute walk away). These small physical gestures of connection are sustaining and anchoring amid all the uncertainty.

Meanwhile I work in my bubble, finding small virtual connections with a remote audience, hoping to finish my book. When the day comes for me to come out of my bubble and give live readings, I will enjoy the immediacy of it all once again. The process goes on in a loop. If there is one thing I have learned, the poetry will guide me along its own path. I must be patient, observant and allow myself time to sink into the "dreamverse," in this one given body that I inhabit.

What Can I Give Him?

She sings with rare confidence –
this red-cheeked girl out of a fairytale,
sweet mouth and yellow tumbled locks,
performing for her father,
rheum-eyed in the hospice chair.

Adrift in our own mid-winter,
the grip of fear holds general
in our land, so lately garlanded
with easy largesse, now gaunt with debt,
and the worst freeze in years.

In this place of death,
where his room is empty
of all he has been forced to shed,
and he is simply grateful for each breath,
we have this lift: our shy daughter
ablaze in song – and he sits easy:
at last, a gift he can receive.