

THE LIFE & TIMES OF A SUBURBAN POET – RHYMING REVERIES AND PUNGENT POEMS



Louis Hemmings has been writing poetry and prose since 1972. It all started when his first (torn up) poem was retrieved from the classroom bin. It was rescued by his teenage boarding-school girlfriend, and muse-to-be. His poetry has been published in Poetry Ireland, Hot Press, various magazines and online. Once he was a widely-published, letter-to-the-editor contributor. His themes were mainly on cycling, recycling and religion.

Louis' thirteenth booklet, *I Am Your Impossible Friend* is available at Carraig Books, Blackrock.

His family have been living in the Blackrock area since 1960. He is a lover and supporter of all things local.

In 1969 I was fortunate enough to be a happy boarder at Newtown School in Waterford. Unlike most other scholars, I chose to go. I was always independent minded, and added to what was the upcoming, the impending separation of my parents, I thought it best to steer clear of that domestic complication.

I still have deeply fond memories of boarding school. It was my home. Most of the teachers were kind-hearted to this ill-disciplined and unacademic day dreamer. In particular my music teacher, Eric de Courcy, and my somewhat stern house master, Leslie Matson. I was constantly conscripted into detention for illicit smoking, kissing girls in dark corners and mitching sports.

*recalled proxy parents, robust boarding teachers:
vocational-loyal, kind-hearted promise keepers;
happily accepted, many dull days of detention –
long-remembered, paternal imprint still mentioned.*

In Third Year a few momentous events occurred at Newtown. Firstly a new female pupil joined my year. Secondly, she and I embarked on a mildly promiscuous relationship. Thirdly, not only did this callous youth cause her to attempt an overdose, he was also responsible for her emotional runaway.

Peers wondered what exactly I was doing, or saying, to provoke such drama. Normally I got on better with the girls than with the geeks and sports jocks. Then the girls all turned on me... and I turned to pouring my misunderstood heart and desperate soul onto paper with my fountain pen. My first piece of forced rhyming, teenage trauma verse erupted! For unknown reasons, I foolishly showed this emotional nudity to one of the form girls who also wrote passionate poetry.

That could have been a mistake...

When I heard that my on again / off again girlfriend was returning from her runaway, I promptly tore up that pathetic poem, and threw it in the bin. On her first day back we accidentally met. She was beaming at me. Strange, thought this heart-breaker and trouble maker. Why wasn't she screaming and spitting at me? Then she produced a rather familiar looking piece of tatty paper, surgically sellotape-sewn. My poem! Yikes!

*– found my much-rumoured verse,
the bin not emptied that week,
forced rhyming I quietly cursed
– why am i so quick to speak?*

Reader, I never looked back. I had found new purpose and drive in my life. Over the past forty-five years it has waxed and waned. Some poems were published, others won prizes. Occasionally I have been asked to give short readings.

My second child, Holly, was stillborn in 1994. In 2014 I wanted to mark what would have been her 21st birthday... I collaborated with Russian graphic artist, Katya Zhu, to create a graphic-novel style booklet about Holly's life and times.

My middle brother, Guy, turned the booklet into a professional, studio-quality video short. This, in turn, was marketed online by me, to every stillbirth link that I could find. Thousands of emails were optimistically sent around the globe, with a handful of interesting responses.

One such response led to part of my video-short, *Goodbye, Au Revoir, Slan* to feature on the Minnie Driver-starring movie, 'Return to Zero'. That movie was the first indie, crowd-funded movie about stillbirth. Hollywood had shyed away from such painful, existential family dramas...

Then the *Sunday Independent* Living section published their very sympathetic interview with me about Holly and my booklet. Also a German Christian TV station broadcast my Holly video short, to fill a broadcasting schedule gap.

*Oh, Holly! how hard to cradle
your dark-haired head,
your limp-dead body,
in my useless embrace.
How could I make your anxious
eyes respond with a baby smile?
How could I? How could I?*

I started to believe that my prose and poetry was actually welcome in society, even if the evangelical faith family, to which I then belonged, thought otherwise... My poetry had always tried (in vain?) to encourage readers to consider what the bible refers to as ‘Father God’.

*historically true, his blood holds power,
don't be a coward, don't head cower:
my slate wiped clean, once-slave to sin:
empty tombs laugh, God gloriously grins!*

With new vigour, I wrote many poems on subjects as diverse as: anti-bull fighting, marriage and sex, my personal experience of stillbirth, the scandal of unofficial (stillbirth) Cillini graves, second hand bookshops, boarding school, statesmen, old houses, pianos, railways, rescue dogs, gardens, rural living and... the pleasures of suburban life in Blackrock.

I like to think that my poetry is accessible to most, in terms of subject matter and delivery. I aim to create them as easy on the ear, attempting to rhythmically scan and rhyme, à la Betjeman. I take a page out of my onetime evangelical outreach Christian faith. I want many “lost” literates to pass through the needle’s eye. I aim to disarm poetic prejudices, where possible.

In 2015 I published *A Sunny Saturday Kicks Off*—my first samizdat-published booklet in fifteen years. This was thanks to Blackrock passionate photographer, Dora Kazmierak. Many photo-enhanced poems were published on my website Kickstartyourheart.com and promiscuously promoted on Twitter, in particular.

2016 started off with the bang. For seventy days I lived just outside Roscrea on a self-imposed writing retreat. Apart from a three-hour weekly visit from my wife, Liz, I was happily home-alone with my bicycle, a few books and my laptop. Apart from a few other short stay visitors, I was industriously writing reams of words and religiously cycling long distances, to discover the lie of the land.

*purposefully pushed pedals, cog-ratchets crisply click,
balloon bike-tyres on bumpy roads hum happily quick;
tractor-treads decorate malleable verge edges,
cycle-saddle height affords fine views over hedges.*

I wrote seventy poems there, some confessional writing about my various muses, a few hundred emails and a few thousand poetry-linked tweets. On my return to Dublin I wondered would I be capable of continuing such a torrential output. Most days since my mid-March rural retreat finished, I find that the “latter rains” in my fifty-year life still pour down. They abundantly water what some might consider to be my (OCD) rhyming couplet mindset.

This year of break-throughs continues modestly. As lover-of-local, I was delighted to be asked to talk about *The Life and Writing of a Suburban Poet* by the Blackrock Society.

To date this year alone, I have written over one hundred and seventy poems and still counting. I won't claim that they are Heaney-worthy, or even Betjeman-esque contenders. I reckon quite a few doff the hat in the general direction of those lyrical heroes. The rest consist of poetic sketches with scansion, rhyming rural reveries or pungent poems that pack a punch.

I amble into an agreeable autumn in my life. In September I published my second collaborative samizdat-published booklet of poems, called *I Am Your Impossible Friend*. This was illustrated by the wonderfully colourful images of Russian artist, Katya Zhu.

*i tread where angels fear to
i jump into numerous cow pats –
(aren't my clay-feet so stylish?)
i pray for your best & brightest future
....i will bless your life no end*

i am your impossible friend

As ever, I am naively hopeful for a few kind, or even critical reviews. Just don't ignore this suburban poet! He wants to tenuously touch a few hungry hearts, suburban souls and mindful minds...

louishemmings.com kickstartyourheart.wordpress.com

Artist and photographic collaborators:–



www.katyazhu.com



Poems: Louis Hemmings
Photos: Dora Kazmierak

www.instagram.com/dorakazmierak/