

Luke Allan was the winner of the Mairtín Crawford Poetry Award from The Crescent Arts Centre at The Belfast Book Festival 2021. The award was co-judged by poets Moyra Donaldson and Annemarie Ní Churreáin. This email interview between Luke and Annemarie took place during the Summer of 2021.

Congratulations Luke on receiving the Mairtín Crawford Poetry Award. Can you tell us about what this award means to you at this particular phase of your writing life?

Thank you. Well, my writing has changed a lot over the years. For a long time I wrote very sparse, cryptic little poems, partly inspired by the concrete poets of the 60s and 70s and partly by the likes of Paul Celan and Robert Creeley and Pam Rehm. I was attracted to the cool, impersonal quality they shared. In retrospect, I see that I was afraid of being *in* the poems. It was a sort of self-denial. But in my late twenties a number of major life events converged (my mum died, I moved away from home, I got married) and my way of looking at things changed. I realised that trying to exclude myself from the poems was actually kind of selfish. It kept me from being human, or was a way of pretending I was something more than human. There was a strange vanity involved in excluding myself from the world I was describing. But actually all we have, at base, is our experience of things, not the things themselves. And I think we can accept that without losing touch with each other, because that basic aloneness is something we share. That's what I'm getting at in 'Something to Show for It'. Anyway, I think what I'm trying to say is that, if someone reads my recent work and says, 'yeah, ok,' then it's a great comfort to me, because it means something human has come through, and that it's probably true that being vulnerable, honest, imperfect, and so on—being only human—is good for you. Good for me, anyway.

In conversations about your poetry with co-judge Moyra Donaldson, there was much to be excited about, but ultimately it was this arresting way of 'looking at things' that kept us coming back and coming back. In several places, the sentences open up just when you most expect them to close down, as is demonstrated in 'Something to Show for it': *'The best time to take a shower with the lights off is forever'*. In other poems the same effect is achieved in the opposite direction, with the line closing down when least expect it: *'Think how far this wind has come to mean nothing to us'*. To my mind, the overall effect is a compelling one of push and pull, back and forth. The poem dares to disorientate and to play with expectation. Would you care to comment on this particular dynamic?

I haven't thought about it that way before. That's interesting. One thing that's really important to me, for whatever reason, is surprise. When I read poems I'm often surfing for those little shocks,

you know? It just kind of feels good. But in a weird way. Sort of exhilarating. That probably makes me a very shallow reader!

As for writing poetry, I forget who said 'no surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader', but that seems to hold pretty true. I guess one thing poetry is for me is a way of getting at my surprise. Like, a way of digging it out of my life. Mining it, perhaps.

But in the real world surprise is actually kind of unpleasant a lot of the time. There are good surprises, but I reckon in the average life there are more bad ones. So the poem is also a safe place to be surprised. It's not unlikely there's some kind of therapy going on here too. Isn't there always.

Increasingly, for me, the basic unit of the poem is not the line or the stanza but the sentence. I love sentences. So I think that shape you described, where ideas take an unexpected turn, is also coming from me really enjoying the sentence as a form open to surprise. The poetic line is still very important to me, of course, otherwise I'd be writing prose poems, but it's not where I begin.

A poem in your selection that I admire deeply is 'Under Cover of Light'. There is a weariness here, perhaps even a sense of labour, that is beautifully offset by the unexpected turning of the sentence. This turn between lines seems to rewrite what we think we know. '*We've tried to give birth/ to the parents in us, but it's hard. We keep on being/ left over*'. It's almost as if the poem keeps resetting or rebeginning. What are first steps in your process of bringing a poem into the world? And what is your relationship to those first or early drafts?"

Apart from rare exceptions, I draft and redraft a lot. But to take a step back—most of the time the poems begin with what I can only describe as a feeling of *coming on*. I'll be doing the dishes by the window, or walking home at night, and I'll sense a kind of wave coming towards me from very far away. This feeling lingers for a few minutes or hours and then goes. And that's my opportunity to write. But to be honest I'm a lazy writer, and I often ignore the feeling and let it pass me by. Well actually that's not quite true. I know in the moment that I have a choice, to respond and get to work or to let it wash over me, and quite often I choose the latter. I used to turn everything into poems, but at some point I decided I didn't want my life to be a sourcebook for something else, so I eased off the gas a bit. I want to enjoy things, not just use them. You can really ruin your life with poetry.

So anyway the wave comes and it stays for a bit and then it passes, and I finish the dishes or I reach my front door or whatever. So to answer your question, most of the time poems don't begin at all. But when they do, I write a lot. I fill dozens of pages with notes and then whittle it down and down, re-phrasing ideas, re-ordering sentences, etc, trying to force the language into the shape of the

original feeling. So in the end a lot gets left out. If I'm lucky some of those unused bits find a home later on, so things get recycled a bit too. I guess I should also say that I can only write on paper. Probably because I can only read that way. Something about the screen is too open-ended for me. I like the enclosure of the page, the way it cuts you off from the world.

Having said all this, I think mainly I don't know what I'm doing. What I just said makes it sound like I'm really aware of what's going on, but in truth it's all a mess. I just try to do what feels good and what I think would be the right thing to do. A bit of writing, a bit of nothing, a bit of washing up—keep it varied.

That lack of knowing that you refer to brings to mind the words of Eavan Boland, 'poetry begins where certainty ends'. And perhaps the act of washing up is the perfect way to counteract the 'mess' of not-knowing. Can I ask you to tell us about your in-progress debut collection?

Well, it's made up of about forty poems that deal in different ways with a few central ideas—broadly: love, death, and happiness. A real poet's jamboree. The manuscript is untitled for the time being, but I have a few ideas. Like everyone, I really struggle with titles. I thought it was hard naming poems, but naming a whole book is hell. Sometimes I wish it worked like naming children, where you're basically choosing from a menu. Each year we'd have a bunch of collections called Mark, a bunch called Judith, and so on. I think poets would be about 50% less anxious if we had a system like that. But so it goes. Basically the editing, from my end, is pretty much done, and what I need now is a good editor to come in and put some pressure on the poems. I'm fortunate enough to be married to a really great poetry editor, and the truth is none of these poems would exist without her, but a fresh ear is worth its weight in gold. So I'm just beginning to send the manuscript to some publishers I admire, and I guess we'll see.

Thank you Luke for your insights into the art and craft of writing. Finally what advice might give to those poets who are moving towards their own first collection and who may be in the process of selecting individual pieces of writing for submission to editors or indeed to the 2022 Mairtín Crawford Award?

I'm always wary of giving advice in case it's bad. And you always end up generalising about things that are complicated and personal. But for me, at least, gathering my poems into a collection has been a process of letting go of almost everything I've written. Poets have a bad habit of over-publishing, in my opinion, and I've always thought that it would be better to publish less, and to have it be of high quality, than to publish as much as possible and have it be a mixed bag. Partly this is a courtesy to the reader, but it's also about being mindful of how the production of hundreds

of millions of books a year contributes to environmental decay. So I think there are a number of good reasons to say less is more. Apart from that all I can say is try to resist being clever, and focus instead on being honest. As simple as it sounds, I think that's the crucial thing. But there I go giving advice.

Some people might sniff at what I just said about honesty. Honest to what? The poem is a self-contained verbal artefact. And so on. But to pretend that poems aren't written by people is like pretending giraffes are the babies of zoos, rather than other giraffes. The page is where we visit poems, but they don't come from there.

Born in Newcastle in 1987, Luke Allan is a writer, literary editor, and book designer. He co-edits the magazines *Pain* and *Oxford Poetry* and runs the book design studio Studio Lamont. He received the 2019 Charles Causley International Poetry Prize and the 2021 Mairtín Crawford Award. He currently lives in Iowa City, where he is a Fellow in Book Arts at the Center for the Book.

For more information about Luke visit LukeAllan.com