



## May Quartet, 2020

Mary O'Donnell

**Citation:** M. O'Donnell (2020) May Quartet, 2020. *Sijis* 10: pp. 339-342. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-11773>

**Copyright:** © 2020 M. O'Donnell. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution - Non Commercial - No derivatives 4.0 International License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited as specified by the author or licensor, that is not used for commercial purposes and no modifications or adaptations are made.

**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

These poems were written quickly one morning some weeks ago, one after the other, each one leading to a very local situation in which nothing much 'happens'. My hope is that the happening incidents exert themselves poetically below the surface. I wanted to remove the writing 'I' from the lyric voice, to hold myself at a distance – or, at an oblique angle to each event.

In "Sulky", the speaker is awoken by the sharp slip of hooves along a country road. This listening event perhaps raises a question also about the 'pace and gait' within the bedroom, where 'markers' are different. What I wanted to achieve was a sense of the morning washing into the room in drifts of sound, and hinting of the wilderness of hedgerow weeds and flowers on the small road outside. Within, a different scene is suggested.

"Thicket" ushers in an interior, and I am regarding the garden as 'interior' for the purpose of this poem. The spaces in which we live are liminal ones that find loose definitions of interiority and exteriority, both physical and otherwise. So, this thicket may be a site of discovery, of revelation, because it is connected with the inner life of the man and woman. I had not considered it as a site of confrontation. There is an alchemy between the couple and perhaps a suggestion that the relationship is mysterious – as relationships often are. The question of loss looms. The woman is in a position in which her greeting him – on whatever level they discover (this is not stated explicitly) – may make the difference she seeks.

During Covid 19 weeks, people in Ireland and elsewhere who have a garden have been working in it. My daughter and husband created a pond, digging, lining, planting and finally installing tadpoles and nine fish. The pond is symbolic. It is an oasis of quietly pouring water from an Italian urn, for example, inspiring tranquility for the voice in the poem. But what interested me was the darkness beneath the surface: the predation at the edge of our lives at present, for example, the need for 'hiding places' and safe havens, yet the possibility of flashes of lit gold and things which are auspicious. There is a holding back, as ever with the question of mystery, and as in the previous poem, "Thicket".

My sister lives in northern California and often writes about the redwood trees and her relationship with the primeval forest. In the poem "Sister", I wanted to look at the question of scale, and how we interrogate it in our private lives. Facebook tells so much. Then nothing. The scale is deceptive in the virtual world, suggesting vastness whereas in reality it is limited. But the trees create questions for the viewer, because of their height they have a vanishing point which parallels the vanishing point of our questions. As our deepest questions are rarely answered satisfactorily, it's a question of sitting things out, trusting.

Technically, I stripped the language of these poems to its barest. This is not something I do very often in my work. It seemed important to hold myself at a remove, to not explain much, to pay attention to a shorter line-break, for example, even hyphenating and breaking the word 'un-loosed' (lines 2-3, "Sulky"). This rejection of an extended line helped contain the thought pattern, which should in the case of these poems be restrained, and almost like smudge-marks from a painter's thumb on a minimalist canvas.

Finally, here are times when our trust in philosophical questions can be awakened, and this period in our lives is one of those. The background questions which have always floated in human consciousness though not always expressed – among them *Who am I really? Why am I here? What is existence?* – have surfaced for us and are ready to be explored as never before in twenty-first century consciousness. I have no desire to exclaim, proclaim, protest or argue. This period is a defining one, which is changing the attitudes, rules, and attachments by which we hitherto have lived life, allegedly 'to the full'. I hope that in writing this small quartet I am entering a space which looks at the matter of fullness from another perspective, and that the poems reveal it to be in the interstices of the hours, in the not talked about, the not immediately revealed, that this other, essential life takes root.

Maynooth, May 2020

"Sulky" \*

This road, always bright,  
on May mornings an un-  
loosed stem free of roots.  
The sulky trots by before six,

heading east and away  
from dark interiors, restive  
stables; away from night,  
which pressed us

to this bed, where pace  
and gait break slowly and  
with different markers.  
The little sulky, a pacer,

\* a sulky is a small, light-weight cart with two wheels and a seat for the driver only, pulled by fine-boned horses and used for harness races. People sometimes refer to the horses themselves as "sulkys".

his dashed metal hoof  
on road, past cow parsley,  
wild garlic, the lingering waft  
of an open night window.

“Thicket”

She is aware of a thread,  
attached, loose, and she  
is bound, could pray

to be held as long  
as necessary. Sometimes,  
she considers the cut

that would make  
difference. They would  
be lost then, he shouldering

down into the thicket  
in a stiff wonder. She could  
meet him there,

greet him, taking  
the hand, the fingers,  
his arcane chemistries.

“Garden Pond”

She and he have stuck at this  
for weeks. Dug deep, lined,  
anchored and filled.

Time for tadpoles, now,  
auspicious fish. They seek hiding-  
places beneath rock, fret

to a new cold when night  
drops, a predator.  
Mornings she arrives

at the edge to find gay  
spatters and flashes  
netted beneath shades

of fern. Little mysteries,  
not telling them much.  
Finned hours ahead.

“Sister”

Her woods are higher,  
deeper than ours.  
A Facebook post  
tells so much, then stops.

Red deer graze, elk  
like monarchs in her  
silent place. This America  
never lost pace; in

California, cedars carry  
her questions to vanishing  
point. Here, too, some  
questions, sitting it out.