

JOHN McAULIFFE

'Dear Sean', begins Paul McMahon's poem of that title, a poem instead of a letter, whose title also catches the tone of an idiomatic expression, the way someone might say, remembering a man fondly, 'dear Sean'. The poem, an elegy as well as a letter, draws these two senses together to powerful effect.

The letter poem is an old device, a way of bringing intimate address, and distance, and longing, into 'To his Coy Mistress' or, differently, into Ezra Pound's 'Exile's Letter'. If this poem starts off with intimacy, it is distance in which it is most interested. The Sean addressed in the poem is no longer with us, a suicide, which is described with surprising and shocking gentleness: 'you filled the bath / with warm water / and turned it red'.

That gentleness and simplicity characterize an unshowy poem's informal tone, which convincingly underplays the dramatic stories this poem unfolds. It is rare, with the exceptions of work by poets like Richard Wilbur and Michael Donaghy and Jo Shapcott, to read a poem which develops a plot as elaborate as this, with its gothic account of an unsent letter, a letter which is found decades later in a space each of the poem's protagonists would have known, 'our old village library', a letter whose revelations will haunt the poem's speaker.

The speaker begins by setting his memories of Sean in relation to Sean's partner Catherine, who has left him and 'your old family home', and whose letter explains why she 'had to leave you and our small village'. The paper on which she has written is 'dotted / with flattened-out craters / where the falling tears / landed in no-man's land,' phrases which suddenly make this letter feel like the real landscape which the characters inhabit, rather than the village and its public and private spaces. (Note too the little pun on 'no-man's land', describing what Catherine is feeling as she leaves them, one of the poem's clues as to the nature of the upheaval which has overwhelmed Sean and the poem's speaker.)

Another of those hints, hints which nicely invite a reader's speculation and interpretation, may be in the poem's setting in the library.

This is a bookish poem, and the speaker belatedly discovers Catherine's letter in a particular book, a copy of Emile Zola's short story, 'The Flood'. The belatedness of the act sets up a dramatic irony which gives the poem its occasion, written as it is decades after the events which that letter describes, and provokes: 'you pointed your finger / to this same book, *The Flood*, / by Emile Zola, and said // it was your favourite, and that / you had recommended it / to Catherine, but doubted / she would ever read it now.'

McMahon's poem sends us to Zola's story, a story which is often read now as an early example of climate change fiction. It telescopes the effects of the River Garonne flooding its banks on generations of a family, and is told through the voice of a bereaved grandfather. McMahon's poem is not so interested in the larger contexts of village life, but his poem does register memorably the devastating life-long or life-ending consequences of one-off actions, while Catherine's 'tears' stand in for Zola's 'flood'.

The poem itself becomes a sort of 'unsent letter', something from the past which is set for future discovery, something the reader comes across, maybe in a library, or in a journal like *The North*, emitting its own painful signal, naggingly reminding us of the ways in which words matter, and can change our landscapes, making us part of a story we had no idea has been lying in wait for us.

The poem's artful shaping of its narrative also marks out McMahon as a poet who is a maker, someone for whom the art is not just expressive, and who has spring-loaded the sequence of his poem's lines to increase their power. He does this without losing any sense of mystery: the poem's revelation is that we can meet ourselves only at an unexpected turn in the road.

About the author

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John McAuliffe's fourth book *The Way In* (The Gallery Press) won the 2016 Michael Hartnett Prize. His versions of Igor Kliekovic's *Stockholm Syndrome* (Smith Doorstop) is the PBS Spring Pamphlet Choice; another pamphlet, *A Good Connection*, is forthcoming from Periplum.