

# TERENCE BRICK

I've been writing for years; it's a compulsion. But I don't have a manifesto or a mission statement. I merely hope that what I've said has not been said before in the same way.

My poems and translations have appeared in a number of anthologies and little magazines including PEN, Southern Arts and Salmon Poetry anthologies and Orbis, Outposts, Interpreter's House, Other Poetry, Sentinel Literary Quarterly and other magazines.

BA Hons Creative  
Writing

## Vincent – A Prose Poem

(Italicized lines are Vincent's own words)

La comédie humaine. London. Ursula, my first love. Once bitten. Twice spurned. I must come to terms with the human predicament. I had a calling. My God, my God. But it was not fulfilled. Therefore I am not fulfilled. My God, my God ...

I blame myself. None other. But I am incapable of hatred or envy. Those people I lived with. My people. Good people. Who eat nettle and dandelion soup, fish pie. Dull rustics who called me bumpkin, thought me clumsy, melancholic, shunned and avoided me. Dull roads, marsh, long avenues of the sentinel poplars, dykes, ditches, brown ploughed earth under a pale watery sun. Bare spiky trees; wildfowl in reeds; windmills in mist. They eat dried fish, smoke strong tobacco, wear clogs, shawls, head scarfs patched and mended. But they farm as if they are going to live forever; live as if they are going to die tomorrow.

Kee, my cousin love. Twice sought. Once burned. My uncle Stricker. First the realization, then the pain, then a numbness. A numbness of spirit.

*I am a man of passions, capable of and subject to doing more or less foolish things ...*

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Some days I know everything. Some days I know nothing. Some days I know everyone. Some days I know no-one. My father, my own father called me impious. Christmas Day he threw me out. My own father, the pastor to his flock, discarded his son on Christmas Day. My hands were red raw. The wind was blue cold.

Christine, my found love. Tarnished. Putaine. Enceinte. Hopeless. Young, but sagging, slack-breasted. I name her Sorrow. To wake in the half dawn with another by my side. Warm in the truckle bed, flannel to the skin, two discarded orphans of no fixed abode. A third kicks in her belly, unwanted before it is born.

*Life has marched over her body. Pain and visitations have marked it.*

The countryside of Drenthe. Drenthe is as desolate as it sounds. Fields of cabbage, fields of corn. Real love, real life.

Margot, my despairing love. Poison.

*I feel ideas about colour coming to me as I paint, which I have never had before.*

Potato eaters. Honest peasants, snub-nosed and boorish. Chopping vegetables. Black lead, white chalk. It is a time of joy to eat potatoes in a feast, pass round a wooden pitcher of ale, red and amber. I paint in earth to evoke their hardship and praise their toil in umbres and dark greens. Under their solitary lamp throwing the shadows of their home, their faces depicting their drudgery. A pot of salt goes around to flavour. It is early spring,

the potatoes in their store still cold and hard enough to remind of their sowing into the drills of unforgiving land. The first fruit of green leaves bursting in summer and the friable earth falling away from the final harvesting as the fork plunges and lifts the white bounty of the fields. Potato eaters.

*It took me the whole winter to work out the heads and hands.*

Arles. Prodigious joy. Postman Roulin. Gaugin. The yellow house, the yellow chair and pipe. Green, vermillion, chrome yellow and blue. Tormented forms. Olive trees. Gyration. The olives are New Testament sweet. Terra cotta roofs. In the strident fiery sun I breathe sunshine in basketfuls. My bed has a blood-red coverlet. Where is Gaugin? He will arrive soon. The day is painted yellow for him.

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St Remy. St Paul Asylum. Rachel, my mercenary love. My severed ear. First the realization, then the pain, then a numbness. A numbness of spirit.

*I am a man of passions, capable of and subject to doing more or less foolish things ...*

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Auvers. Dr Gachet. I have so many things happening to me, crowding in on me that I don't even know what is happening. Red ochre. Black-red.

*There are some roofs of mossy thatch here which are superb and of which I shall certainly make something.*

The houses wilt in July heat, mongrels stretch in the sun. Cats curl in the shade. Only the lizard flits back and forth, scuttling over the lichened wall. The roofs lurch in languor, thatched eaves droop. The harvest is in. Stooks of hay are piled higher than a man.

There are low rolling hills, spinach green, parsley green, ochre and nut brown in a rhythmic movement, restless and chaotic. The farms and outbuildings are symbols of an internal struggle. The scene is not really at peace. I have never really been at peace.

What is the purpose of art? What is the purpose of life? Do we all have a calling?

*Life is probably round.*

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Man measures his strength in harvest. Some fields ploughed – by the sweat of thy brow – my God returns to me. Time was I thought my God was my salvation; now I know the sun is God. Perhaps I was correct all the time.

Yellow is at the heart of everything; ochre, like my chair and pipe. That's my colour. Why does the sun colour everything? What is the colour of silence? Money for paint, Theo,

please, money for paint, not for food. I can go without food. My painted failures burden me. My paint tastes of potatoes. Potatoes taste of the earth.

I do not paint what I see, I paint what I feel. Black as the turbulence of crows over the corn. I must go south. I am a cat among pigeons, a dog among sheep, I'm persona non grata everywhere. But everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

I paint the cornfield with yellow ochre as thick as the stem of corn. It waves hither and thither in the breeze; the breeze becomes a gale, the crows descend, they mock me in my rage; the crows descend, they mock me in my despair.

*I am a man of passions, capable of and subject to doing more or less foolish things, which I happen to repent, more or less, afterwards. The sadness will last forever.*

### **Bibliography**

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## The Visitation

'He seems to be alright at the moment although they tell me it's a full moon and you should be careful.'

'I'll be OK, I don't believe that stuff,' I say, 'he's used to me. I'll give him a bit of humour. Laughter goes a long way!'

I went down the familiar noisy corridor to a quieter place and after a number of bolts and keys I entered his room.

'Hello, Jonathan,' I ventured. I see him seated in a light-blue plastic chair with a brown plastic tray before him. His elbows are on the tray, his hands are brought up to his face. He is unkempt: he needs a shave and a hair comb. He is wearing regulation clothing. He looks his age.

'Have you had many callers since my last visit?' I ask, knowing full well that he hasn't.

'My watch stopped some days ago. I take it to be a bad sign.' He answers abruptly. Settled, I produce the hip flask.

'Just a snifter of Jameson's,' I suggest, whereupon he grabs the flask, tilts it back and empties it down his throat.

'Thank you ... I can't quite remember ... do I call you *padré*?'

'You can call me Father Chadwick, if you like, then again you can call me Chuck. That's what Spud calls me. He's really Bishop Benedict Murphy. Tell me again how it happened. I'm trying to make sense of it all.'

'I was in the garage tending my bicycle. It's a vintage one now. Fred Dean, my frame builder, was an apprentice to Claud Butler. I've probably told you that before, haven't I? Dr Death sloped past the entry of my drive to next door, remained on the pavement, turned and walked back down the road. He arrived at the point where Becket's Car Sales' window reflected his angular form making him doubly sinister. He crossed the road but when he was only half-way across he turned to look at me. There was no need to do this. I got agitated. Dr Death did not turn down the alleyway at Mottram's Newsagents but continued along the road until he was out of sight. I returned to my bike, I'd stripped it right down to the bottom bracket, but then, on impulse, I went to the end of my drive. I looked up and down the road. There was no-one in sight. But then I saw a human form under a tree. It was one of those tremendously dark evergreens. A white face. It walked towards me. He had a very long brown overcoat.

My hackles rose to an irrational fear, some banshee, a ghostly white. I turned my polished lucky pebbles in my hand searching for the black one in the dark, reliant on touch only. White pebbles settled on the grass. There was a storm over that sinister grass. Dr Death faced me with folded arms and a slight smile. You might think he has a gaunt face, skin drawn to his skull, but he hasn't. He has a round face like yours or mine, but nowhere near as ruddy as yours.

'Frail, finite man,' he said, 'You will be mine when the grass is brown in July heat, when the storm is for a summer afternoon, and when your pathetic lucky pebbles are all grey.'

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'I'll tell you the joke that Spud told me the other day. It was a good one about my friends Barney, that's Father Finnegan and Father Burke.'

Jonathan looked at me with bulbous frog-like eyes, rocking backwards and forwards in his seat.

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Yesterday I did a little gardening. My hands were freezing and the skin across my knuckles broke revealing a thin uneven line of blood from index to little finger. Sometimes I am haunted by the vast incalculable sum of money the world commits to nuclear weapons. It would pay for desalination and irrigation where needed and wave power generated electricity the world over. I lay awake at night considering the possibility of a better world. A world without the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the SNP, the DUP, Plaid Cymru, the Donald Trump Appreciation Society - the whole goddam lot of them. Men in white coats came the other day. I don't like men in white coats. Last Friday the ground was so hard that the mere effort of driving the fork downwards bruised my wrist sufficiently for me to request a visit to the doctor. It was refused. I spent the whole night thinking of Aleppo.

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'Father Finnegan blessed the woman as she left the confessional, drew the grille and in the darkness brought the hip flask of Bushmills Blackbush Blended Irish Whiskey to his lips.

"I'm through for today - the trivia I have to listen to." He took another swig. "Lent's nearly over. I'll try Jameson's next time. How many penitents out there? Three. They look a feeble lot. Not a decent sin among them."

But then a demure girl walked slowly towards his confessional, entered and knelt in the darkness. She crossed herself.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It is one week since my last confession."

"Oh, Jasus," he thought, "what can you do in a week." He turned sideways for another swig.

"Jameson's next time, better than Bushmills."

He peered through the grille,

"Fourteen, I reckon, nice fresh complexion, bit of a Kerry accent, maybe."

He cleared his throat.

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I can't watch the news anymore. Is there such a thing as good news? If there is it doesn't get reported. The newspapers are scandalous anyway, banks are crooked, and politicians are duplicitous. I could go on but I won't. Last weekend, the bleakest of the year I think, I had just the one meagre blanket. I counted five holes in it and the appearance of an extremely threadbare patch which promises to become a hole very soon. Men in white coats came the other day. I don't like men in white coats. The bread is edible but not very well made - doughy, salty. I'm not allowed salt because of my high blood pressure, but that's not an issue here - take it or leave it, I suppose. I don't know what gets spread on it but I've got better stuff in the back of my garage for my old Fred Dean. I don't know where it is now. Probably still back of the garage, I hope so, I couldn't bear to think of someone else riding it.

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“Confess your sins with a contrite heart. Tell me, my dear, what you have done.”

Another swig, a short one this time. And then nothing that St Patrick’s College, Maynooth could possibly have prepared Barney Finnegan for what came to his ears.

“I’ve killed a man, Father.”

He emptied the bottle. “Saint Brigid, help me. A decade of the rosary, perhaps. Saint Theresa, help me.”

He rushed around to where Fr Burke was in an adjacent confessional.

“I’m out of Bushmills,” he whispered, “swap places.”

Fr Burke was after having a gargle and he just left his penitent, some middle-aged woman going on about her gardener, and sloped around to the adjacent confessional. The young girl was beside herself with grief and Fr Burke tried to console her.

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The chaplain came to see me a few days ago. He asked me if I would repent. I told him I had no real reason for repentance. He left me a *Gideon’s Bible*. I prefer *The Authorised Version* myself. I suppose you’ve got your own one. There’s a rumour going round that the steak pies are one hundred per cent horsemeat. I don’t know what the problem is, that’s better than a sausage that’s forty per cent pork and sixty per cent sawdust. Not that any of that bothers me; as you’ve probably guessed I’m a vegan. As I said earlier *I could no more hurt a fly*.

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“It’s all over now,” said Fr Burke, “all over now.”

“But,” said the girl, “he was on top of me and I just let him have it.”

“Don’t fret yourself, now,” he consoled.

“But what about the police?”

“I wouldn’t be worrying yourself about them, now, they’ve enough to be going on with, what with speeding drivers. And you won’t have to see him again, will you?”

“No, that’s true.”

“Well there we are then. For your penance I’d like you to say three Hail Marias. Please make a fervent act of contrition.” He raised his hand in blessing over the bewildered girl as Father Finnegan was left listening to a middle-aged spinster drooling over her hairy-chested gardener.

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Men in white coats came the other day. I don’t like men in white coats. I am a sensitive man whose feelings towards his fellow man are nothing but philanthropic and altruistic. *I could no more hurt a fly* is not a cliché, it is the bedrock of my being.

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‘Right, Jonathan, it’s your lucky day, my old son. You’re going ’ome.’ There was a touch of melodramatic sarcasm in the officer’s voice. Jonathan did not look him in the eye.

‘Get your things, then.’

'I don't have any things.'

The cell door closed with a pronounced click and Jonathan made his way down the green and black corridor to the raucous clangour of tin mugs on iron bars. Fellow prisoners were bidding farewell to a prisoner that they did not know.

In the governor's office a man Jonathan did not know was beaming at him from behind his mahogany desk. On the wall the pendulum clock was about to strike eleven.

'You can thank Father Chadwick for all his efforts at securing your release. I hope you have learnt from your punishment and I hope your reception into society will be trouble free.'

Jonathan looked into the sky. The sun was trying to break through the green grey clouds but there was no breeze to enliven the atmosphere. He took a last look at the castleated gatehouse. All that was missing was a drawbridge and a moat. HMP Keston was no more, although he would never erase it from his memory. He had enough money for a bus into town and in his pocket a train ticket to his home station. He kept his head down and took little notice of anyone. The bus jolted. He had forgotten how much a bus jolts - backwards, forwards, sideways. His eyes dulled over during the train journey. Forty five minutes to Kings Cross. Turnstiles, escalators, a newspaper kiosk, business men and lovely young women.

The Bagel Factory. Would he have enough money for a Santa Fé Melt? He could just remember it as he sat on a bench and bit into the sesame seed bagel. What was it he tasted? Somethings he hadn't tasted for a very long time. Smoked salmon, mayonnaise, real pepper.

A young woman sat on the bench opposite.