



HarperCollins e-books



Conamara Blues

John O'Donohue

JOHN O'DONOHUE

Conamara
Blues

POEMS



HarperCollins e-books

IN MEMORY OF MY AUNT,

Mary O' Donohue

(1896–1923)

of Caherbeanna, who died
in a tragic road accident shortly
after her emigration to America

CONTENTS

APPROACHINGS

Thought-Work	2
First Words	3
Nest	5
Black Music in Conamara	7
The Wound at the Side of the House	9
Before the Beginning	11
The Banshee's Grotto	13
Wind Artist	15
Elemental	17
The Pleading	18
The Secret of Thereness	19
Breakage	21
Inner Circle	22
Fluent	23
The Stillness Above Is Listening	24
Mountain Christening	26

The Night Underneath	28
Decorum	30
Imagined Origins	31

ENCOUNTERS:
THE ROSARY SONNETS

An Paidrín	34
The Rosary	35

The Joyful Mysteries 36

The Annunciation	36
The Visitation	37
The Nativity	38
The Presentation in the Temple	39
The Finding in the Temple	40

The Sorrowful Mysteries 41

The Agony in the Garden	41
The Scourging at the Pillar	42
The Crowning with Thorns	43

The Carrying of the Cross	44
The Crucifixion	45
The Glorious Mysteries	46
The Resurrection	46
The Ascension	47
The Descent of the Holy Spirit	48
The Assumption	49
The Coronation	50

D I S T A N C E S

Words	52
Wings	54
The Transparent Border	56
The Angel of the Bog	58
Placenta	60
Mountain-Looking	63
Seduced?	65
At the Edge	67
Up the Mountain	68

Prisons of Voice	70
The Ocean Wind	71
Outside a Cottage	73
Breakage	75
Double Exposure	76
Elemental	78
The Night	79
Anchor	80
A Burren Prayer	82
Notes	84
Index of First Lines	
Acknowledgments	
About the Author	
Other Books by John O'Donohue	
Credits	
Cover	
Copyright	
About the Publisher	

A P P R O A C H I N G S

I want to watch watching arrive.

I want to watch arrivances.

—HÉLÈNE CIXOUS

I think back gladly on the future.

—HANS MAGNUS ENZENSBERGER

Think of things that disappear.

Think of what you love best,

What brings tears to your eyes.

Something that said *adios* to you

Before you knew what it meant

Or how long it was for.

—NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

THOUGHT - WORK

In memory of Joe Pilkington

Off course from the frail music sought by words
And the path that always claims the journey,
In the pursuit of a more oblique rhythm,
Creating mostly its own geography,
The mind is an old crow
Who knows only to gather dead twigs,
Then take them back to the vacancy
Between the branches of the parent tree
And entwine them around the emptiness
With silence and unfailing patience
Until what was fallen, withered and lost
Is now set to fill with dreams as a nest.

FIRST WORDS

For Shane O'Donohue

Parents know not what they do
When they coax those first words
Out of you, start a trickle
Of saying that will not cease.
Long after they no longer hear
Your talk, the words they started
Continue to call out for someone
To come near enough to hear
The cadence of what has happened
Deep in the inevitable growing
Heavy and weary of heart
Under the layer of days
Where memory works cold fusions,
As if your voice could carry you
Out of the stillness to the warmth

Of someone who would linger with you
To search the frozen parts for tears
Until a forgotten line fires
Down through the word-hoard
To where your first silence was
Broken, and your rhythm born.

N E S T

For J.

I awaken

To find your head
Loaded with sleep,
Branching my chest.

Feel the streams
Of your breathing
Dream through my heart.

From the new day,
Light glimpses
The nape of your neck.

Tender is the weight
Of your sleeping thought

And all the worlds
That will come back

When you raise your head
And look.

BLACK MUSIC IN CONAMARA

For John Barry

To travel through the trough
Of this Sunday afternoon,
As mist thickens into a screen
All over Conamara,
Holding the mountains back
From the clarity their stern solitude
Strives after, releasing the spring
Lustre of the long grass, ever further
Into a fervence of indigo, so much
So that the granite rocks strewn about
Seem eventually abstract, afterthoughts
To something that took place before them.

Take the silver bucket
Full of coarse turf cut from under here;

Light its brown shape in the grate
Until it blooms into a red well.
Put on a disc of smooth steel
That slowly builds, yields up a pulse
Of jazz from Roland Kirk,
Who never was here, but somehow
Played a live concert once, so full
Of the withheld litany
Of this shy, Conamara day.
The saxophone catches onto
Some riff of murmur,
Deep beneath the roots of the mountains,
Where granite relents, giving way
In tears, to the blanket poultice of the bog.

THE WOUND AT THE SIDE
OF THE HOUSE

For Pat O' Brien

The glistening, neon dome
Turned the night bathroom,
With its window open,
Into an addictive sanctuary
Which had drawn in
The masses of the night.
Thousands of demented ephemerae,
Needle specks of shivering flies,
Moths and myriad winged things
Congregate around its merciless,
Unrelenting light.

Having waited all day for the daylight
And its vestal colours to leave,

They arose from the bog,
Navigating rushes, grasses and briars.
Rising into the wonder
Of this night, with its moon
Casting mint light from behind
The mountains of Conamara.

On the adventure
Of their few hours of life here,
They had the misfortune
To pass by on this side of the house
And become at once entranced
By this strange window of light,
A white wound in the night,
Its drawbridge down,
And flew in to the blind worship
Of its deadly brightness.

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

Unknown to us, there are moments
When crevices we cannot see open
For time to come alive with beginning.

As in autumn a field of corn knows
When enough green has been inhaled
From the clay and under the skill
Of an artist breeze becomes gold in a day,

When the ocean still as a mirror
Of a sudden takes a sinister curve
To rise in a mountain of wave
That would swallow a village.

How to a flock of starlings
Scattered, at work on grass,
From somewhere, a signal comes

And suddenly as one, they describe
A geometric shape in the air.

When the audience becomes still
And the soprano lets the silence deepen,
In that slowed holding, the whole aria
Hovers nearer, then alights
On the wings of breath
Poised to soar into song.

These inklings were first prescribed
The morning we met in Westport
And I was left with such sweet time
Wondering if between us something
Was deciding to begin or not.

THE BANSHEE'S* GROTTO

After a photograph by Fergus Bourke

The . . . bean sí is a solitary being . . .

—PATRICIA LYSAGHT

I heard her across the river crying; a neighbour was dying.

—PADDY O'DONOHUE

The tear is the anticipation of the eye's future.

—JOSEPH BRODSKY

The messenger comes from that distant place
 Beside us where we cannot remember
 How unlikely it is that we are here,
 Keepers of interiors not our own,
 Strangers in whom dawn and twilight are one.

*The bean sí is the death messenger in the Irish folk tradition.