

**TAKING RISKS IN POETRY:
GILLIAN ALLNUTT, JEMMA BORG, CAROLINE CARVER,
KATHERINE GALLAGHER
HANNAH LOWE, CAROLINE PRICE, PENELOPE SHUTTLE**



Gillian Allnutt

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Jemma Borg



Caroline Carver



Katherine Gallagher



Hannah Lowe

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Caroline Price



Penelope Shuttle

... we asked for their views on risk in poetry...

Gillian Allnutt

Often, introducing a poem at a reading, I'll say: 'Well, I don't really understand this one myself': and someone will look askance, as if I were being irresponsible. But if the poem's reach doesn't exceed my own, if it doesn't apprehend more than I do, what was the point in writing it?

Words are there to give shape to the space or silence that is within a poem, that surrounds it, and that is, in a sense, its true substance. Usually I use as few as I think I can get away with. Always I ask: Is this arrangement of sound and meaning on the page going to 'say' something to someone other than myself; possibly even say more?

And then of course a woman poet isn't supposed to be 'difficult' and if I am I run the risk of not being read at all.

Jemma Borg

Risk is inherent to writing: we risk failure every time we put words on paper – that is the nature of language. There is also calculated risk – the deliberate employment of strategies that stretch a reader or ourselves. Writing in a way that is seen to be risky has changed. It's not exclusively about being 'avant-garde' or 'experimental' anymore, but more about writing unfashionably and going against the 'mainstream', whatever that is. Examples might include using 'no no' words like 'soul' or, surprisingly, writing 'beautifully'. The

risk here is in alienating readers because of offering something they find hard to place or hard to judge. As writers, I think we can and should choose to do whatever we want within the writing – but we must make it work. That really is our end of the bargain. We are not responsible for other people's tastes.

Caroline Carver: *Amblongus pie*

Writing always in the same safe style is an eventual recipe for failure – shuts the creative juices down, once it becomes easy. I'm all for Edward Lear and his experiments with nonsense writing. Some work brilliantly. Others are like his recipe for Amblongus pie, which ends with this advice: *Serve up in a clean dish, and throw the whole out of the window as fast as possible.*

My pile of failed Amblongus pies grows larger in the mid-winter months. But if you take this route, fear not. One day you may find a wonderful frangipani rooting itself in the heap of discards, filling your room at night with its exotic scents. But never rely on it, frangipani makes no nectar. It may not be long till you find yourself back at the drawing board.

Taking risks again. Tossing more Amblongusses out of the window.

Katherine Gallagher: *Calendars of Risk*

A writer, wanting to make a mark, soon learns that progress involves risk and a determination to be adventurous – as in 'Make it new' (Ezra Pound), in 'Tell the truth but tell it slant' (Emily Dickinson), in take the 'road less travelled by' (Robert Frost), in 'to be a mad cow' (Jo Shapcott), in to enter 'other voices' (from burglars to sorcerers) and so on. It means daring to be different. What if one can't get published? Oh dear, the risk-list goes on. In all of these situations, we're avoiding the 'safe', the 'predictable' and we may not live happily ever after. But who thought of the poet's life as 'a bed of calm'?

Learning to take risks or to write what is sometimes called 'ambitious poetry' takes time and is greatly helped by reading and writing outside one's comfort-zone, and by attempting new themes. Of course, poets have to make a living and to feel supported in their work. This is why organizations such as Second Light, and magazines like ARTEMISpoetry with supportive editors, have had such an impact on women's writing. W H Auden said, 'It's a poet's hope: to be, like some valley cheese, local, but prized'. Stevie Smith said, 'Man is alone in his carapace but poetry is a strong way out.' Bring it on!

Hannah Lowe

I'm particularly interested in one dictionary definition of 'risk': 'to expose (someone or something valued) to danger, harm, or loss'.

It made me think of what I have exposed in poetry – my life and emotions and the lives of others, especially the private life of my late father, who might well have not wanted the details of his painful childhood bared, or his unorthodox work. I hope these things haven't 'harmed' him, or his memory. I know that writing about him and our relationship has helped me manage the loss of him.

And of course we must remember that poetry is not always (or ever?) 'true', though many of us invest in it in this way. Another risk is what writers do when we leave biographical truth behind and perhaps reach for emotional truth instead. I think this risk might lead to the opposite of what the dictionary suggests.

Caroline Price

For me, risk is not so much about form, or language, or subject matter (although you do have to acknowledge the risk of hurt or offence to someone close if you use very personal material: you have to be sensitive to this). Taking risk is personal; it's the opposite of safety. It's safe not to venture outside your comfort zone, not to push yourself or expose yourself to criticism. I tell myself: don't stay with that initial burst of inspiration; examine and develop it. Make yourself think deeply about what you're writing: is it honest? Do you really mean what you're saying? Do you really know what you're saying? Are you hiding behind

flippancy, irony, wilful cleverness, obfuscation? Most importantly, risk feedback. Get an honest response from someone whose work and judgement you respect, and consider it. Dare to read your poem aloud to others: you know that suddenly you'll hear it through an audience's ears and see immediately what does and doesn't work. The risk you're taking? – that the poem doesn't get the reaction you'd hoped for; that it may require many more hours of redrafting to make it successful. But what do you really risk, ultimately? You risk your poem being better!

Penelope Shuttle

In August 2016 I set myself the task of writing a poem, however short, every day. It had to be typed up that same day, not left to loll around in a notebook for ages, as is my usual practice.

The risks were that the poems would be glib, mechanical, or drive me bonkers. So, I wrote a poem a day for over six months. It was heady, exhilarating, haunting. By February 2017, I hit burn-out, the words refused to come. I had gone deeply into complex interactions between language and life. The risk that I might be driven bonkers was a fact I had to negotiate very carefully until a kind of equilibrium returned.

I am now wondering whether to take the risk of returning to writing a poem a day for a year, but leaving a gap (February, March) to mark the place where I had to step back.

Reading back through the poems, some are slight, inconsequential, journal fragments. Others are portals into deep investigations to which I feel compelled to return, to complete an incomplete year. Those months spent on risky ground continue to bear fruit, to intrigue and puzzle me, to shake me out of my familiar zones in life and poetry. Risk is good. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, a new poem...
