



"Spring Morning Pastoral"
by Sean Sexton, Oil on Canvas

Profiles in Poetry

Poet Laureate Sean Sexton



Sean Sexton working his cattle

Many poets have "day jobs." It is a common struggle to balance the demands of our careers and the pursuit of poetry. So I thought, who better to talk with about maintaining that balance than Sean Sexton, Poet Laureate of Indian River County. On a rainy Saturday afternoon in December, I caught up with Sean. His day job is ranching, a life requiring 24/7 attentiveness. Over the past 40 years, Sean corralled enough time to become established as an esteemed poet and visual artist. As you can see by the painting illustrated above, he is an amazing artist, but today, we're talking with him about his poetry.

Q: So Sean, what did you do this morning?

A: This morning we fed our growing stock, and then treated an injured calf out in the pasture. We tried to get her to her feet, but she's suffering from a skeletal injury. So we treated her with some medications and fed her milk-replacer in a bucket as she's unable to nurse from her mother presently.

Q: How do you approach the creation of a poem?

A: Often I'll have ideas come to me, triggered by something I do or see. When that happens, I make accommodations. I now know you have to get them down when they occur, so I keep journals with me at all times. The idea for a poem might disappear forever if ignored. Sometimes I use my iPhone's voice-memo texting capability and record an idea if my hands aren't free. I have drafted entire poems with the voice app giving dictation as the details fly by. Sometimes, if at 3:00 AM I've wakened and can't go back to sleep, I'll get up and transcribe these ideas from journal or phone into my computer. It's all process, the editing light is always blinking in my mind, and a poem is only done when I feel it has reached a kind of true form. I rework poems often, subtracting or rearranging words, sometimes whole lines working toward greater economy and of course beauty of what is said. Some poems come to completion more readily than others. "Descent," (see sidebar on the next page) first drafted in an airport on my way home from the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering after several revisions, seems finished to me.

(Continued on next page)



Sean Sexton with fresh-picked greens

Descent

She has her father's hands,
small and delicate on him,
and ears of the old man
made in pearly skin.

His features, fair and slight,
best imagined on another,
have crossed a great divide
reaching from his mother.

We walk around our lives
a panoply of parts,
all with the he and she of it
tangled in our hearts.

~ Sean Sexton

Sexton has two published
volumes of poetry:

• *Blood Writing*
— Anhinga Press ([link](#))
and

• *May Darkness Restore*
— Press 53 ([link](#))

Also, some of his art is currently
in a group show at the Albin
Polasek Museum & Sculpture
Garden in Winter Park ([link](#))

Q: How do you cope when inspiration and work conflict?

A: The first thing you do is suffer. I have come to the realization work and my life on the land is where poetry originates. I do what's necessary to keep art alive in my life. I would never quit the ranch in order to write.

Q: Can you remember the first time you realized, "Hey, I'm a poet!"

A: I come from a family with a literary tradition. My mother, also an artist, wrote poetry and shared it with us. She always encouraged me. Her sister, my Aunt Doris [Herold Lund], was a professional free-lance writer and wrote a New York Times Best Seller, *Eric*, about her son who was a soccer star and battled leukemia. When my first full poetry volume, *Blood Writing* (Anhinga Press), was in the finishing stages, Lynne Knight, one of the editors, called me and said, "We have your Library of Congress number and information for the book and you're listed as a poet, so now it's for real!" That moment had an impact on my thoughts about myself. I wrote from an early age, perhaps because that was what we did in my family. People around me valued it, and I was enabled to value it myself. Cathy Turner, my first English teacher in college, infected me with her love for literature, it is partly her fault I'm a poet.

Q: Are there similarities between your painting and your poetry?

A: There are a lot of similarities. In both I seek a true form. What I mean is, I winnow through the subject matter: words in a poem or visual content of a painting, to find a formal construct. This narrowing reveals questions the creative process answers. It is true for poems and paintings. You have to become very specific with language—choice of imagery, words and their cadence, obeying the constraints of language, visual language included. However, it is not always a process of reduction, it can be a building process too.

Q: Have you ever been blocked?

A: Yes. Mostly by depression. With ranching, weather and finances are factors. I've learned it's never about the art or its source—it's always my internal state that's wrong. This land is an inexhaustible source of inspiration. For me, sometimes painting is a refuge from writing, and sometimes the opposite, but having these channels keeps me functioning creatively. I once asked my friend, Claude Wilkinson, also a writer and painter, if he ever had trouble deciding which thing to do each day. He said, "Usually."

Q: Who are some of your favorite literary figures, past and present?

A: Seamus Heaney! Also, Donald Justice, who may have been the greatest formalist writing during our lifetime. Early on, I was inspired much by William Carlos Williams, who said "No ideas but in things!" and Walt Whitman, who was capable of saying anything! I consider him the greatest American artist of the last century, and Wendell Berry, who wrote *Jayber Crow*, is one of today's greats.

Q: What is the most personally rewarding poem you have written?

A: I hope it's the next one.

Q: What has 40 years of poetry taught you?

A: To mean more fully what I say. Poetry has given me a greater appreciation of, and reverence for the beauty of language. I wouldn't have understood that, had I not become a poet.

~ Mark Terry with Sean Sexton