

**Nell REGAN**  
**POEMS**

**Silence**

Seeking purchase on the balcony rail  
Finding the solemn note of the steel girder

Damping into wooden boards  
As little symphonies splutter on the tin chair,

The rain is falling, picking out  
Each surface and calling it back;

If a poem displaces the weight  
Of its sound in water

Let these loosened drops  
Brim over the edge of night

Evaporate and fall again  
To call back a sonar image

Of where I lie, without you,  
And let a singing line begin.

**Water to water, salt to salt**

I want to tell you about the child;  
how she followed a gull with her eyes,  
then her neck extended, body lifted,  
and arms out flung so she all but  
took flight with hardly a breath  
between seeing and becoming;

I want to tell you about the harbour;  
how its wall is an arm I swim within  
as salt and sun work an alchemy  
in my body; how its cupped hand  
is the bell tower of the church whose  
stones are sunk below the water,

and I want to tell you about the church;  
how its back wall is a great baroque  
confection, illuminating the gloom,  
but these salted prayers dissolve the tiles  
as the sea rises and its undertow hauls  
me back to where your coffin set sail.

## Topographies

i

My feet walk the lost topography  
of a South London suburb;  
through Burnt Ash Copse and St John's Wood  
where tower blocks squat and lorries  
kick up dust, down Verdant Hill to  
Loampit Vale where buses whine to a halt.

ii

Days when I am dumb, it is all I can do  
to collect names, which, strung together  
make a necklace of this city that might  
ease the braced musculature of my throat -  
Friendly Street and Stillness Lane  
Silver road and Nightingale Walk.

iii

Beyond the Matalan and the MFI  
the Tesco and the KFC, between  
the caf and the car park runs Silk  
Mills Path. Listen! Under the noise  
of the traffic on the busy interchange  
is the whirr of a loom, under the trundle  
of the train is the clack of a shuttle  
and that dust in my mouth as I walk  
under the junction, that dust is lint.

## Whale Song

*On Sunday night at 8pm the batteries on Fort Camden and Carlisle opened fire on suspicious objects in the water believed to have been a German submarine. During the firing two of the shells from the batteries ricocheted off the water passing to the mainland of Crosshaven. One shell burst but the other did not. No harm was done by the shells landing on the mainland and nothing has transpired as to the effect of the engagement with the supposed unwelcome visitor to the harbour.*

*Southern Star, January 1915*

Squealing and keening it entered the sea,  
seeking each breach of defence,  
echoing beyond its reach -

how my soughing and spouting set it off  
is not known. Ploughing through  
the sound I thought I was bound for home

but when the sky darkened at four  
I knew I had come too far  
out of my glutinous, smooth waters.

It wheeled past me and air itself  
splintered; the sea it cracked from side to side.  
then bubbled and churned pig iron

so hearing smelted and fell in great  
hissing drops to the sea floor. Song  
stood still. Listening was lifted

on the swell and sucked back  
into its vacuum. It set off a wave  
that gathered oceans to itself, collapsed as sound.

## Liffey Swim

The light on my forehead winks mud  
as I move along the Liffey bed  
in the 3am settling of the city.

The arc of a bike wheel  
reveals itself in a shroud  
of fronds and slime.

A lugworm inhales  
to the bounce of a lone shout  
off the granite of quay walls

where I lay my palm  
as a far star exhales  
in a speck of mica

which I pick and place  
on the outstretched  
fingertip of the city.

## Dispatches

### i

JCB's swagger up and down  
and above the rhythms of the masts,  
the clatter and clink of the halyards,  
is the loud retort of the pile driver;

they are building between the piers -  
a new marina whose struts  
envelop the inner harbour  
where sun ignites the water in a bitter

February wind, *an easterly like this  
would've had 'em straining*  
a fisherman nods to small trawlers,  
quiescent at their moorings.

Outside the ice house, as three women  
fillet and slice the day's catch,  
an old bull seal sits up in the sea,  
steadies himself for stinking off cuts.

I sling a mackerel carcass in but,  
as he dives, a cormorant cleaves through  
the water, flensing off a gobbet of fish,  
emerging in triumph. The old bull surfaces,

steadies himself again. A tremor  
from the site reverberates  
through us and the fisherman looks up  
*they'll be after this place next.*

### ii

I am back in this town where I grew up,  
where the looped railings of the seafront  
are so familiar to my hands that now, walking past,  
they reach for its blue, rusted chain to swing

and release so it hits the tree with a woody  
*thunk* and fits snugly into the wound  
by which I know each trunk,  
its weight made visible in wide lips of bark.

Then on, past a black iron stump  
with its orbit of tiles, the ghost of a Victorian  
fountain; the day after the explosion  
a boy brought a gouge of twisted metal

to show the class but the teacher  
was not impressed. And on,  
by the station and the Georgian terrace

where screens flicker in a cream office,

so at odds with the damp flat  
it must recall being. I broke into  
its derelict basement once  
and among the rubble and the dank

found a flattened skeleton, perfect  
from its cat skull to tail to splayed legs,  
as though whatever force crushed the breath  
and flesh from it was still pressing down.

### iii

The sea is busy, with light and glitter  
and wave. This place was all about  
clambering, jumping surefooted from  
one sharp edge of granite to the next,

clearing the space between one ridged  
wall and another, then belting down  
wide slate stairs as salty air  
dispersed the tension of home.

With the scent of unpacking  
still in the flat I found my place  
to drift; between the tar roof  
of the kitchen and the hospital wall.

*Charlemont Terrace.* Still redolent  
of the dark that winter the power  
was off. One night I pleaded to be let  
go to bed at five, but the look on my

mother's face sears through my mind.  
I did not ask again and sometimes,  
still, when I think I have cleared  
the sharp edges between a then and

a now, I walk past Charlemont;  
my nine year old eyes stare, reproachfully,  
at the self who walks by the tar roof  
of the kitchen and the hospital wall.

**Salmon Fishing**

We stand in twos and threes, watch the dark sea pulse through the narrow mouth of the bay, wait for the underbelly of a wave to erupt as fish. Cloud shrouds the mountains - the tip of Errigal goes under and it spills over and down the back of Muckish. I watch my feet sink slowly in the sand as the horizon foams and falls by Tory. A shout goes up! Three men race across the dunes, drag the slender anchor onto the boat and clamber in, one pulling at oars as the others feed the net in a wide arc back to shore where, hand over hand, we haul it in, heavy with its catch of water and two mullet that flicker and slap in the mesh. A fisherman stamps, with the scrunch of boot on fish on wet sand the urgent muscle stops. He yanks at its gills to reveal a mess of blood and bone and flesh.

All evening I have been tempted by this neat metaphor this staring at wave and shadow; feeding out a net of language, the need to disentangle each mesh to feed out again after the shout goes up. Yes, and the anchor, the boat - but the dead mullet has put paid to that. What I need to know is what the salmon know. How a shoal spawned at the source of the Ray may enter Ballyness bay and one will leap, know they have come too far

so back they go - away from this wrong source, the Tulloghobegly-out the narrow neck of the bay, right into the wide Atlantic and along the strand a mile or so till they reach the Ray. What sensors, scents or pull of tide, what internal geography, what physiology could navigate this? I try to understand, learn, recall logic may only be part of what goes on; today I sat with a friend, she left with *I can hear that baby cry and must get home* and I do not know how I will cope with breasts full of milk that weep on hearing a baby cry - still too scared I will be that girl again; the simple lines of the self she knew altered and she disowned a body she thought betrayed her as a stranger's hands ground in its narrow neck, swallowed a cry from a place so dark and deep that it began to weep blood.

I want to know what the salmon know.

**Performance**

*for Donal O'Kelly and Trevor Knight*

The two men leant in deep over the bridge, hands on stone and elbows crooked for support they peered further in, mesmerised by what they saw. "It *is* a fish" said one.

\*

'But I am a stone' said the fish  
'mottled and still in the sunlit water,  
the taut muscle of my body as steady  
as my neighbours who are sunk in silt,  
around and over us the water flows.



Only my spine is so supple  
that my tail wavers in the spate  
and moves from its impression of rock.  
Until then, movement is only light and shadow'

\*

'I am the fish' said the plastic bag  
snagged on a low rock in the river  
'Give me one fixed point  
and the coursing water will flesh out  
a body for me, mottle me with weed  
and refracted light so I become fish that is stone  
that is fish till your eyes reach  
frayed and streaming edges  
which could not be tail -  
this alone gives me away but till then,  
substance is current and light'

\*

'God we're fools' the men laughed  
as they walked away 'City slickers  
who can't even tell fish from stone  
from rubbish in a stream'

\*

Back under the bridge and the river coursed on,  
stone became fish turned to plastic  
and spoke  
'I think they put on a play last night.  
I heard that in the dark, gas heater-hum  
of an old church hall the audience peered  
up at that man who became gull and,  
as his shoulders rose,  
his elbows led the wingtips of his wrists  
to hover in the seas and sky of the stage.  
He was squawk and flap, wave-slop wing-flip  
till he alit when, with the pivot of a foot  
and a single gesture that possessed him  
became in turn:  
sailor, lover, father, mother,  
convict, crew and governor,  
most beautiful of all though  
he was child to the father  
as her voice rang out  
from the altered muscles of his throat  
*papa's home.*

\*

'Aye' said the stone.

\*

“And *I* heard,” said plastic to fish,  
“how the other sat deep in a pool of blue light,  
and his fingers sent storm  
and rain, horse hoof and oar creak  
to reverberate through the hall  
and each body there,  
that in the moment the whale let out  
an unearthly scream  
it crackled up each spine  
so they smelt salt and fear and dying whale.  
They filed out silent, bemused at meeting earth  
when their feet thought they’d find  
the deep roll of the ocean.

Selection of poems published or forthcoming in *Bound for Home*, Arlen House, 2011,  
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Review*, *Fortnight*, *Journal of Contemporary Writing from Ireland in Translation*, Trinity  
College Dublin & Gorky Literary Institute and *Poetry Daily*.