

I DON'T NOT BELIEVE IT

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, trans. Paul Muldoon. Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2007.

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The American poet A. R. Ammons recalls looking out from an anchored ship in the South Pacific at the distant horizon and noting “the line inscribed across the variable land mass, determining where people would or would not live, where palm trees would or could not grow.” Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill’s most recent book, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, which is inhabited by “na murúcha” or “merfolk” (that is mermaids and mermen), is also concerned with where the sea meets the shore. And like Ammons, for whom the waterline marks a limit and therefore a place of imagination and creativity, Ní Dhomhnaill playfully investigates the strange behavior of the recently landed merfolk, who despite possessing certain peculiarities are strikingly similar to those of us without gills.

The waterline is, after all, as Ní Dhomhnaill’s neighbor and storyteller Tom Martin tells us in one poem of the collection, simply a distorted reflection: “Níl aon ainmhí dá bhfuil ar an míntír / nach bhfuil a chomh-mhaith d’ainmhí / sa bhfarraige. An cat, an madra, an bhó, an mhuc, / tá siad go léir ann” (“There’s not a single animal up on dry land / that doesn’t have its equivalent / in the sea. The cat, the dog, the cow, the pig. / They’re all there’). Because of the similarities between the world above and below the waterline, we are never really sure to what group of people Ní Dhomhnaill is *actually* referring as she describes the patterns and practices of the merfolk. Most obviously and most bluntly, the merfolk could be read as a pre-modern folk culture that must cope with the advent of modernity, just as the merfolk must cope with their landlocked existence. In this sense, the collection is a parody of the West of Ireland and more specifically the Blasket Island biographies with their insistence that the folk world is dead and gone. In “Na Murúcha agus an Litríocht” (The Merfolk and Literature) we find the classic declaration, “nach mbeidh a leithéidí arís ann” (And though their likes will never be seen again), that marked so many of these twentieth-century biographies.

Nevertheless, at other points in the collection the speaker, poet, and mermaid blur, and the poems seem highly autobiographical. “Na Murúcha agus Galair Thógálacha” (The Merfolk and Infectious Diseases) turns on the shared superstition that when three young women from the same town are

pregnant at the same time, one will die within a year—a superstition which Ní Dhomhnaill recounts in a far more personal fashion in her essay “Un-alive Beings and Things That Don’t Exist.” It is also important to remember that the mermaid sequence does not begin with this collection, but with another autobiographical poem “An Mhaighdean Mhara” (The Mermaid) from Ní Dhomhnaill’s first book, *An Dealg Droighin*, in which the distance between ethnographer and informant is collapsed and the speaker assumes the voice of the mermaid.

Since the poems shuttle back and forth between the autobiographical, the historical, and the imaginary, to see this collection as straight allegory would be a mistake. The primary cause of this shifting is the elusive figure of mermaid, who is rooted in an oral tradition with which most of Ní Dhomhnaill’s readers have only a vestigial familiarity. In other words, we aren’t sure what’s true and what’s false, or more specifically, what’s believed and what’s not believed. Since we are aware of these epistemological blind spots (and one could say that the very nature of folklore, prohibits an exhaustive understanding) it allows the poet to shift emphasis away from questions of veracity or historicity. Because we cannot be sure, it no longer matters whether the merfolk’s distaste for music and fondness of dairy products are substantiated by the oral tradition. Language, stripped of its truth-value, marvelously persists as utterance, as habit. Language becomes simply that which is done, and to claim that many of Ní Dhomhnaill’s observations about the merfolk are “true” or “accurate” would be as silly as claiming that the number four wears a feathered hat. To put it as Ní Dhomhnaill does, “Ar leibhéal éigin, / ní chreidim ann, ach mar sin féin, ar chuma mhórán iontas eile / a bhaineas leo, ní bhréagnaím é” (At some level / I don’t believe it, though at the same time, like so many other miracles / having to do with the merfolk, I don’t *not* believe it).

At the heart of the sequence is this question of the fundamentally shared bedrock of language. We learn that the merfolk once spoke a language which is said to be different from any of the Indo-European languages and instead is classified as “pelagic” in that it belongs to the seas. In “Teoranna” (Boundaries), Ní Dhomhnaill observes that from the “*blaghtracha fánacha den ‘Ursprache’*” (odd snatches of the ‘Ursprache’ that remain) we recognize that “everything in the language runs into everything else” and that there aren’t any boundaries between the words. We also learn that “*Is léir chomh maith nach bhfuil a leithéid de rud acu / agus ainmfhocail, / nó go dtuigeann siad an coincheap, fiú,...*” (It’s obvious as well they didn’t have such a thing / as a noun, / or didn’t even understand the concept,...) One wonders how this language without nouns, or even the concept of differ-

ence, would work. To those of us above the waterline, a language in which similarity collapses into singularity is unimaginable. Perhaps such a language would sound something like the “claisceadal na míol mór” (the whales’ antiphonal singing). What is so odd is that logically we recognize that there must be similarity between all bits of language for difference to have something to push against, and yet we cannot *see* this similarity. The best we can do is venture that when we delight in the poet’s claim that the merfolk must wash their hair before the sun sets, or any of the other observations which evade truth-value, we are responding to the essential similarity of language, the thrill of affinity.

As for the task of crafting a poetic text which feels familiar yet distant, Ní Dhomhnaill’s long line is incomparably suited. In 1969, Máirtín Ó Cadhain famously claimed that Irish-language poetry would be in a bad state if it had to depend upon “liricí gearra” (short lyrics) for its lifeblood. Although there have been poets such as Mícheál Mac Liammóir and Eoghan Ó Tuairisc who have used a long line and have written long poems, Ní Dhomhnaill’s long line is unique in that it is unconsciously poetic and conversational. While a handful of poems such as “Dubh” (Black) and “Leide Beag Eile” (Another Tiny Clue) aim at more specific poetic forms and devices, most are marked by natural line breaks and a colloquial ease. On the facing pages, Paul Muldoon has stayed uncharacteristically close to the text. Muldoon has succeeded in making subtle adjustments in voice so that the oddities of a more literal translation don’t spoil the simplicity. The result is a number of impressive long-lined, long poems which ask us in two languages to look for the unity of language. It is an impossible task, for we are trapped like the mermaid in our nature and can no more describe the quiddity of language than she can describe the essence of water, and the result is tantalizing poetry, “‘Brat gléineach, ábhar silteach, rud fliuch’” (‘A shiny film. Dripping stuff. Something wet’.)