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American Life In Poetry

BY TED KOOSER, U.S. POET LAUREATE, 2004-2006

Memories have a way of attaching themselves to objects, to details, to physical tasks, and here, George Bilgere, an Ohio poet, happens upon mixed feelings about his mother while slicing a head of cabbage.

Corned Beef and Cabbage

I can see her in the kitchen,
Cooking up, for the hundredth time,
A little something from her

Limited Midwestern repertoire.

Cigarette going in the ashtray,

The red wine pulsing in its glass,

A warning light meaning Everything was simmering

Just below the steel lid
Of her smile, as she boiled

The beef into submission,

Chopped her way
Through the vegetable kingdom

With the broken-handled knife

I use tonight, feeling her
Anger rising from the

dark
Chambers of the head
Of cabbage I slice through,
Missing her, wanting
To chew things over
With my mother again.

American Life in Poetry is made possible by The Poetry Foundation (www.poetryfoundation.org), publisher of Poetry magazine. It is also supported by the Department of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Poem copyright (c) 2002 by George Bilgere, whose most recent book of poetry is "Haywire," Utah State University Press, 2006. Poem reprinted from "The Good Kiss," published by The

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A worker in the air...Photo by Patrick Ready

The Fifty Minute Mermaid

Paul Muldoon's translation of Irish poet Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's latest collection.

By Carmine Starnino Poetry Media Service
The Fifty Minute Mermaid, by Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill. Tr. by Paul Muldoon. The Gallery Press.

Hands up, anyone who knew that the merfolk's language was "pelagic"? I certainly didn't. Much remains unknown about these mythic creatures, and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's new book can help. A bluffer's guide to those from "Land-Under-Wave," *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* is based on close imaginative contact with its citizens, their history, and the trauma that "left them oddly out of the swim."

Merfolk are mermaids; or, more specifically, they are an Irish species called "merrow" who have the ability to assume human form. According to Ni Dhomhnaill, merfolk were driven to land two centuries ago, a race on the run. Why they fled "the warm bosom/of the ocean" has never been explained, and the mermaids themselves are mum on the subject. Were they victims of "some sort of ethnic cleansing"? Casualties of a *Paradise Lost* cataclysm that now leaves them struggling "to climb back again/to the place from which they first fell"? It's a mystery. But whatever happened, there's no going back: they've renounced water, their gills long defunct. Aquatic refugees in dry diaspora, the merfolk seem cursed. Worse, the general population they live among, while fascinated, can't muster much in the way of sympathy--as Ni Dhomhnaill says, "anyone with so much bad luck and misfortune following them/must have done something to deserve it."

The tragedy of the merfolk--namely, that they are a people cut off from their own legend--can also be said to define Ni Dhomhnaill's poetic project over the last twenty years. *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, her fourth book in English, is translated by Paul Muldoon. This is because Ni Dhomhnaill writes exclusively in Irish, a once-suppressed language she loves for the way it effortlessly incorporates "quick and hilarious banter and a welter of references both historical and mythological." As it happens, the description captures the magic of her English voice, just as merfolk--who use words "still imbued with the old order of things"--capture the proud exile of Ireland's Gaelic speakers. The half-human "morph" of the merfolk as a metaphor for the act of translation is something else Ni Dhomhnaill is exploring in *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*.

The book provides facing originals, but the accuracy of Muldoon's work will, for most North American readers, be hard to judge, even while his quirky embeddings are unmistakable ("I don't give a hoot," "to scare the living daylight," "discombobulated," "thingammies"). This, however, isn't our first look at Ni Dhomhnaill. She is already known--via earlier distillings by Michael Hartnett, Seamus Heaney, and Medbh McGuckian--as a compulsive storyteller. And Muldoon's version jibes with her celebrated billing. In their English skin her poems are hugely playful, practicing a subversiveness just fractionally above unclassifiable. Ni Dhomhnaill is a nuts and bolts poet: she puts her ideas and subject-matter right up front, while somewhere in the background extraordinary meanings assemble. Whatever you do don't ever mention the word "water" or anything else that smacks of the sea--"wave," "tide," "ocean" "the raging main," "the briny." She'd as soon contemplate the arrival of frost in the middle of summer than hear tell of fishing, boats, seine or trammel nets, lobster pots. She knows such things exist, of course, and that other people have truck with them.

She thinks that if she covers her ears and turns away her head, she'll be free of them and she'll never hear again the loud neighing of the kelpie or water horse claiming its blood relation with her at the darkest hour of the night, causing her to break out in goose pimples and having sweat lashing off her while she's fast asleep.

--From "The Mermaid and Certain Words"
Ni Dhomhnaill's mode isn't exactly satiric or surrealistic, but derangedly reportorial. The poems are filled with fascinating crypto-anthropological details: the merfolk susceptibility to disease, their difficulty holding a tune, their antipathy toward breastfeeding. It's tongue-in-cheek scholarship that eventually runs to the horrific: a chilling mention, at the end, of merfolk returning to "Land-Under-Wave" to find Auschwitz-like "heaps of gold teeth" and "old garments in garment-piles." Ni Dhomhnaill always works this way--allegorically, she goes deep. There is rarely a point-for-point match, yet her major targets are impossible to miss: colonialism, female sexuality, the Catholic church. But *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*, constructed out of two parts, is significantly darker than her previous books. The first part is

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Words To Use:

- Cepaceous:** This describes anything that is like an onion. Think of all the ways. It could be sight, taste, smell or touch.
- Demersal:** Here defines something that is sinking to the bottom. Most used with something in fluid or water, it could apply to the stock market, but most probably not to the price of gasoline.
- Espalier:** Gardeners know this as the lattice work used for training a fruit tree, sometimes used for that fruit tree itself that is trained.
- Funambulist:** This is one of those daring circus performers who walk the tightrope.

We Traveled Not Alone

Slippin' and a slidin', is no way of drivin'
When surgery is your destination
Its snowin' and icin', the steering wheels
fightin'
And nothing is much consolation.

We got in quite a fix, when my sweet
wife got sick
Twas no relief for two months or more
This icy snowy mix, makes the roads
very slick
Wet and colder weather is in store.

We have front-wheel drive, and hope to
stay alive
By driving so very carefully
Ready to take the fight to the cold snow
and ice
While safely arriving joyfully.

We got there and returned, we didn't
crash and burn
Divine intervention played its part
We're thankful to be home, we traveled
not alone

The love of the Lord was in our hearts.

- Weldon L. Smith
Eastland, Texas

merfolk-free but discontent-rich. It closes with a seemingly autobiographical narrative where the poet, during a drive, replays a series of grim memories: a dying friend, news of Serbian atrocities, her husband's recent six-day coma. She is readying herself for the ultimate "task"--to take it all in, to make room in your heart without having your heart burst.

Here, then, is the heart-bursting genius of this book. Ni Dhomhnaill's merfolkian epic--part two of the collection--is the alternate reality of a woman trying to "take it all in." The frantic fabulating, with its deadpan exaggerations, suggests a desperate wish-fulfillment. Like *The Decameron*, *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* explores the way our lives are constructed of fictions--fictions that both shelter us from painful facts and allow us to face up to them. It is a tale told in crisis, and a must-read.

Carmine Starnino's newest book of poems, *This Way Out*, is forthcoming from Gaspereau Press in spring 2009. This article first appeared in Poetry magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org

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Rhymes To Use:

- Sugarcoat
- Creosote
- Nanny goat
- Remote
- Wrote
- Rote
- Boat

Writers And Poets!

The Eastland/Callahan County Newspapers announce that the Baird Star will be publishing submitted poetry and short stories. We will also be publishing a literary journal in the near future.

- We ask for first-time publishing rights. All other rights will remain with the author.
- There will be no payment, but you will get your works before the general public. We will be sending sample copies to other organizations, the literary world and libraries for their archives and your notoriety.
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