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Water, Dreams and Poetry

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When I was invited to participate in a reading on the theme of poems from port cities, followed by a discussion on poems that emerge in ports and shorelines that are portals between different elements and forms of life, I was perturbed. I didn't think my poetry reflected much of the city of Cork, or its riverine situation. Although I'm conscious that I try to tune into the psychogeography of places I visit when I'm travelling, I was less aware of any influence on my writing of the place I inhabit. And certainly, water is not an element I've reflected on in any conscious or deliberate way. When I was in my twenties, I visited an astrologer who told me that there wasn't a drop of water anywhere in my astrological chart! He said I was all air, with a little fire thrown in for good measure. It's true that I can't swim, though I've tried many times to learn. I'm wary – or fearful – of water.

And yet – when I took out my second collection *Stone Girl* to choose poems for the Port Cities reading, I discovered to my surprise that there is quite a lot of water in the book. And much of it is river water, either that of the river Lee in Cork, or of the rivers of my travels, the Seine or the Danube in this instance. The everglades of Florida also put in an appearance. When reviewing the book, the poet and critic Ruth Sharman wrote "This is a world of blurred boundaries, veering between water and stone, between past and present, rootedness in reality and the strangeness of dream" (Sharman, 2020). She goes on to say that "intimations of death are everywhere" and that "stone here has no more substance than air" (Sharman, 2020). This got me to thinking about poems as bridges that enable us to breach the gap between states, to understand, to accept and ultimately to make the transition

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Mary Noonan taught French literature at University College Cork over a period of thirty years. Her first collection, *The Fado House* (Dedalus Press, 2012) was shortlisted for the Seamus Heaney Centre Prize and the Strong/Shine Award. A limited-edition pamphlet – *Father* – was published by Bonnefant Press (NL) in 2015. Her second collection, *Stone Girl* (Dedalus Press, 2019) was shortlisted for the Derek Walcott International Poetry Prize in 2020. *Dans un autre compartiment*, a selection of her poems translated to French by poet Valérie Rouzeau, will be published by Apic Editions (Alger) in 2025.

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between life and death. Perhaps it is true to say that poems inhabit a boundary space between past and present, life and death.

Although one doesn't necessarily consciously set out to focus on certain themes in one's writing, I'm forced to acknowledge that my muse has inhabited that boundary between past and present, life and death, since the beginning. Reviewing my first book, *The Fado House*, the critic Hilary Sideris wrote "If a book is a house, then Mary Noonan's first book of poems […] is one inhabited by ghosts, speakers who are well acquainted with […] human suffering" (Sideris 2013), while Amanda Bell wrote of *Stone Girl* that "Mary Noonan's second collection operates like a time capsule, shuttling between past and the present, youth and old age, Cork and Paris […] (Bell, 2019)." I once told a poetry mentor of my frustration with my Muse's attraction to the dark, to death. He replied when it comes to the Muse, there isn't much one can do: one must stay with her and write out what she wants to emerge. I must conclude therefore that something in me wishes to inhabit, and write out of boundaries, to be porous to different states of being, to make poems that would inhabit the in-between.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in his book *L'Eau et les Rêves* [*Water and Dreams*] writes that "all rivers rejoin the river of death" (Bachelard 93). His book is a meditation on the nature of what he calls the 'material imagination', that is the imagination that draws its impetus essentially from the four elements, and from the human body's interaction with them. He suggests that elemental images underpin all other images, and that the unconscious, where all art takes its source, is the realm of these images. Water is, according to Bachelard, the element in which we originate and to which we in some sense return, at least at a psychic level. The history of narrative, and of art in general, would seem to bear this out. The uterine waters, symbolizing Eros and creativity more widely, are also the waters of the unknowable and unsayable – the vast oceans of Romantic art, the abyss or void of Baudelaire's poetry – and ultimately, the Styx, the river of death all humans must cross at the end of life. Water is, of course, the element of transition, providing an imaginary for movement between states. A dream of water is a dream of movement, of metamorphosis. Perhaps our first dream was of water. Certainly, our first sensory impressions must have reached us through the medium of water. And perhaps all art aspires to return to the infantile watery domain, where meaning was still fluid, where we still had memories of what went before, of what we came from. Seamus Heaney referred to poetic technique as a "raiding of the inarticulate self", a return to the preverbal, when the psyche's rootedness in the material imagination was lived and felt in a vital way through the drives: "Technique, as I would

define it, involves not only a poet's way with words [...]. It involves the discovery of ways to go out of his normal cognitive bounds and raid the inarticulate [...]" (Heaney 47). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud described the structure of the primitive human psyche as that of a double helix, in which Eros and Thanatos, the life and death instincts, are intertwined. The death instinct remains buried in the unconscious for most people, or it remains repressed for most of a life. But the underground river continues to flow, and we can feel its pull, albeit distantly. We evolve toward the death inscribed in our bodies from their beginning.

French psychoanalyst Guy Rosolato, in his essay 'La Voix, entre corps et langage', writes of the human voice as the medium that navigates the divide between the preverbal and the verbal, between the body and language (Rosolato 75). Voice is the vehicle that shuttles back and forth, carrying vestiges of our first sensory impressions, of the first voice heard, that of the mother. And the voice is also marked by our psychic knowledge of death. As voice passes into poetry, this profound knowledge, rooted primarily in the body, is transmuted. The infant's first dreams, says Bachelard, are dreams of organic substances. The primitive imagination is material, and the poet, through the act of writing, may reactivate, though her auditory memory, the dreams and images of her child's body – that is, reconnect with the images she inhabited as an infant and young child, now largely inaccessible. It is the sounds – the musicality – of language that give access to the in-between, where the self is still mobile – fluid – flowing in and out of life and death. Poems, emerging from the poet's voice, can be rooted in this ancient network – the roots of a poem may sink quite deeply into the preverbal unconscious. And this may be a watery place, where boundaries are shifting, where we are both mother and father, where we can move back and forth across the threshold separating human life from what lies beyond it.

Water and shorelines must surely come readily to the poet's consciousness when she intends to invoke mutability. But intention is not always what drives or controls a poem – on the contrary, many would say that there is no place for intent in poetry. The poetic self is intuitive, apprehensive in the sense of apprehending what lies beneath the visible. My partner, the poet Matthew Sweeney, who died of motor neuron disease in 2018, wrote his final collection of poems in the last year of his life. What is remarkable is that the River Lee in Cork, where we lived, is a central feature of the collection. In *Shadow of the Owl*, the voice is that of someone living beside a river, and the river is inhabited by creatures that are carriers of death. And in the end, the reader begins to feel that the river itself is the place of death that the poet has come to live by in his final weeks and days:

Crocodile

He was in the river, as if he belonged there,
dawdling in the water with two eyes above it –
twin periscopes that flicked from one bank
to the other. I mean, this wasn't the Zambezi,
it was the River Lee! I stopped to stare at him,
and that drew his famished attention to me.
Time to vamoose, I reckoned, hurrying across
the Shakey Bridge, at the end of which I turned
just in time to see him climb out of the river
and start to wriggle up the steps. Jessie Owens'
run in the Berlin Olympics, 1936, was my model
as I crossed the road and hared past the pub
to my gate, which I firmly rammed shut, then,
after entering, slammed the door of the house.
I positioned myself at the front downstairs
window, half-camouflaged by the curtains,
sipping my glass of water, and sure enough,
two minutes later, Mr Crocodile nudged the
gate open with his snout, and let his little legs
bring him halfway up the path where he lay himself
down to wait. His tail wagged slightly like a dog's.
Was that a smile when he bared his teeth,
or was he simply showing me what daggers
they were? How on earth could I withstand him?

All of Sweeney's verve and spiky humor are present in these last poems, that follow, as always, the unnerving logic of dreams. But the dream had become a nightmare, and the catastrophe, impending in all his earlier collections, had now come to pass. When it came to my own poetic response to my partner's illness, it was the waterways of Florida that gave me the metaphorical structure for a poem which I wrote in the final months of his life. When attending a conference in Tallahassee, I visited a local museum that had artefacts of the Indigenous Peoples of the region, including wooden craft for navigating the everglades. An information card on one such exhibit bore the title "Transportation in a Watery World." This must have chimed with my imagination at the time, as I kept it as the title for the final poem in my second collection:

Transportation in a Watery World

And I'll put you in the dug-out canoe,
like Moses in his basket of reeds,
sent down-river, out of harm's way.
I'll take you in that Seminole barque
and we'll travel the waterways of Florida –
the St John's River, and the glades –
gliding on the tracery of green veins
through swamps and grassy marshlands.
The grey beards of low-hanging oaks will
tickle your wrists as you loll in the prow
and I'll row for all I'm worth. No Indian
will shoot poison-dipped arrows at us
from the mangroves, and there will be no
white-water rapids. The glades will cocoon us
in a lace shawl of light as we slip along, drift
and sometimes rock gently in our floating
cradle. The canoe will move slowly, but
endlessly, through the watery green.

Here, the waterway is indeed the portal to an afterlife, envisioned as an entirely watery world. This was not my intention for the poem, but reading it now I can see that it conjures a safe passage to the next life for the loved one. In some way, the poem connects with the burial rituals common to many religions of giving the corpse to water, to embark on its final journey. As the voice navigates the divide between the imaginary and the symbolic – between the body and language – so poems negotiate the in-between. As the element of mutability and indeterminacy, water must surely well to the surface in poems that sink their aquatic roots in the unconscious, where life and death entwine. Poetry is the art of origins and endings, and water may be its primary medium. At the very least, water is a powerful emblem for the transmutations of poetry.

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