

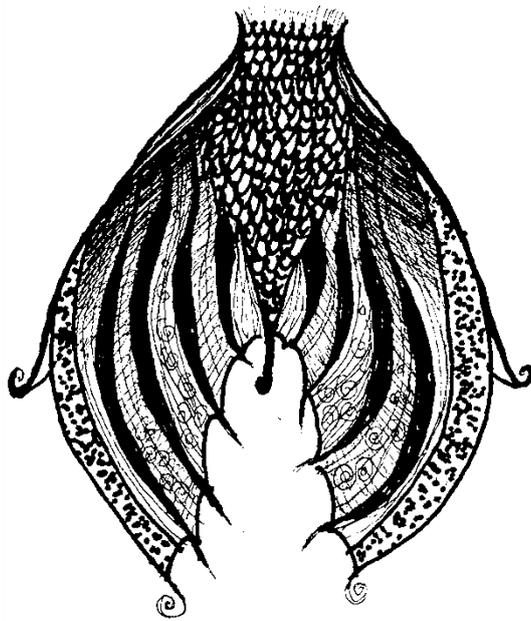
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NUALA NÍ DHOMHNAILL

# Na Murúcha a Thriomaigh



## **Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill** **1952-**

### *Life and Literary Status*

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill was born in Lancashire, England, in 1952. Her parents, both physicians from Ireland, were Irish speakers and Ní Dhomhnaill spent many of her formative years in the Irish-speaking area (known as Gaeltacht) in West Kerry. She is Ireland's best known and most widely translated contemporary poet in Irish. In March 2018, she received the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award for her achievements in poetry. Immersed in a vibrant oral literary tradition from an early age, her poetry is written in the vernacular Irish of West Kerry. Many of her poems are conversational in tone, and often contain humour, but they also contain intertextual references to a plethora of literary and non-literary sources, both national and international. Oral tradition and folklore material are reimagined through the lens of Jungian philosophy and that material is often inflected with a contemporary feminist perspective.

More information can be found on Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and her work in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature: Volume II, 1890-2000*, (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 339-342.

See also

[www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/8173/0/Nuala-Ni-Dhomhnaill](http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/8173/0/Nuala-Ni-Dhomhnaill)

### **A note on these poems**

These three poems are taken from a sequence of 33 poems by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill. This extended sequence was first published in the Irish-language anthology *Cead Aighnis* (1998) under the title 'Na

murúcha a thriomaigh'. That this publication is included in the prestigious collection *Modern Ireland in 100 artworks* (2016) is an indication of its canonical status. The sequence was republished in the dual-language anthology *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* (2007). Paul Muldoon translated the sequence of poems under the title 'The assimilated merfolk'. Other possible translations include 'The merpeople who dried up', 'The merpeople who were left high and dry' or 'The merpeople who fell silent'. The poems examine the precarious existence of a population of mermaids (both male and female) who have been forced to leave their natural marine habitat and who are anxious to make a quick transition to life on land. The exact cause of their exodus is not discussed in the poems but the reader is left in no doubt as to the traumatic nature of the impetus. The mermaids' determination to assimilate entails jettisoning their native culture and where possible, repressing the memory of their previous existence.

### **Language and translation**

Paul Muldoon's English translations do not reproduce the rich sound patterns of the originals written in conversational West Kerry vernacular, but he finds an equivalence that preserves the quirky, dark humour and tenor of the Irish poems. Notably, Muldoon's translations are much more literal than his previous freer translations of Ní Dhomhnaill's work in volumes such as *Pharaoh's Daughter* (Gallery 1990) and *The Astrakhan Cloak* (1992).

All poems below are taken from the anthology *The Fifty Minute Mermaid* and reprinted with the kind permission of Gallery Press.

## An Mhurúch san Ospidéal

Dhúisigh sí  
agus ní raibh a heireaball éisc ann  
níos mó  
ach istigh sa leaba léi  
bhí an dá rud fada fuar seo.  
Ba dhóigh leat gur gaid mhara iad  
nó slaimicí feola.

‘Mar mhagadh atá siad  
ní foláir,  
Oíche na Coda Móire.  
Tá leath na foirne as a meabhair  
le deoch  
is an leath eile acu  
róthugtha do jokeanna.  
Mar sin féin is leor an méid seo,’  
is do chaith sí an dá rud  
amach as an seomra.

Ach seo í an chuid  
ná tuigeann sí –  
conas a thit sí féin ina ndiaidh  
‘cocs-um-bo-head’.  
Cén bhaint a bhí  
ag an dá rud léi  
nó cén bhaint a bhí aici  
leosan?

An bhanaltra a thug an nod di  
is a chuir í i dtreo an eolais –  
‘Cos í seo atá ceangailte díot  
agus ceann eile acu anseo thíos fút.  
Cos, cos eile,  
a haon, a dó.

Caithfidh tú foghlaim  
conas siúl leo.’

Ins na míosa fada  
a lean  
n’fheadar ar thit a croí  
de réir mar a thit  
trácht na coise uirthi,  
a háirsí?

## An Mhurúch agus Focail Áirithe

Ná luaigh an focal ‘uisce’ léi  
nó aon ní a bhaineann le cúrsaí farraige –  
‘tonn’, ‘taoide’, ‘bóchna’, ‘muir’, nó ‘sáile’.  
Ní lú léi an sioc samhraidh ná trácht a chlos  
ar iascach, báid, saighní trá nó traimile, potaí  
gliomach.

Tá’s aici go maith go bhfuil a leithéidí ann  
is go mbíonn gíotáil éigin a bhaineas leo  
ar siúl ag daoine eile.

Ceapann sí má dhúnann sí a cluasa is má chasann  
sí a ceann  
go mbeidh sí saor orthu  
is ná cloisfidh sí búir dhúr an eich uisce  
ag fógairt gaoil shíoraí léi go doimhin san oíche,  
amach trí lár a codladh uirthi.

Níl aon namhaid eile aici  
ach an saol fó-thoinn a chleacht sí  
sara iontaigh sí ar a hathshaol ar an míntír  
a chur i gcuimhne dhi. Séanann sí ó bhonn  
go raibh oiread is cac snioga de bhaint aici leis  
aon am. ‘Ní raibh aon tsuim riamh agam  
sna piseoga sin, nó in aon sórt seanaimsearachta.  
Aer, eolas, solas gléineach na heolaíochta  
Is ea a shantaíos-sa.’

Ba chuma liom ach go bhfuair eas-sa amach  
san eitheach í.

Istigh sa Roinn le Béaloideas Éireann,  
tá lámhscríbhinní iomlán de Bhailiúchán na Scol  
breactha óna láimh,  
scríte in uisce, le clipe de sciathán rotha,  
ar scothóg feamainne mar phár.

Tá trí cinn déag de scéalta fada  
agus smutaíocha de chinn eile, i dteannta le  
horthaí, seanpháidreacha, tomhaiseanna agus  
aroile  
le tabhairt faoi ndeara ann.  
Óna hathair is óna máthar chríonna is mó  
a thóg sí síos iad.

Diúltaíonn sí glan dó – ‘An máistir  
a thug mar obair bhaile dhúinn é fadó  
thiar sa bhunscoil. Chaitheamair é a dhéanamh.  
Ní raibh aon dul as againn.’  
Cháithfeadh sí fuil shróine  
sara mbeadh sí riamh admhálach ina thionscnamh.

## Cuimhne an Uisce

Uaireanta nuair a bhíonn a hiníon  
sa seomra folctha  
ag glanadh a fiacla le slaod tiubh  
is le sód bácála,  
tuigtear di go líonann an seomra suas  
le huisce.

Tosnaíonn sé ag a cosa is a rúitíní  
is bíonn sé ag slibearáil suas is suas arís  
thar a másaí is a cromáin is a básta.  
Ní fada  
go mbíonn sé suas go dtí na hioscaidí uirthi.  
Cromann sí síos ann go minic ag piocadh suas  
rudaí mar thuáillí láimhe nó céirteacha  
atá ar maos ann.

Tá cuma na feamnaí orthu –  
na scothóga fada ceilpe úd a dtugaidís  
‘gruaig mhaighdean mhara’ nó ‘eireabaill mhadraí  
rua’ orthu.

Ansan go hobann téann an t-uisce i ndisc  
is ní fada  
go mbíonn an seomra iomlán tirim arís.

Tá strus uafásach  
ag roinnt leis na mothúcháin seo go léir.  
Tar éis an tsaoil, níl rud ar bith aici  
chun comparáid a dhéanamh leis.  
Is níl na focail chearta ar eolas aici ar chor ar bith.  
Ag a seisiún síciteiripeach seachtainiúil  
bíonn a dóthain dua aici  
ag iarraidh an scéal aisteach seo a mhíniú  
is é a chur in iúl i gceart  
don mheabhairdhochtúir.

Níl aon téarmaíocht aici,  
ná téarmaí tagartha  
ná focal ar bith a thabharfadh an tuairim is lú  
do cad é ‘uisce’.  
‘Lacht trédhearcach’, a deir sí, ag déanamh a  
cruinndíchill.  
‘Sea’, a deireann an teiripí, ‘coinnibh ort!’  
Bíonn sé á moladh is á gríosadh chun gnímh  
teangan.  
Deineann sí iarracht eile.  
‘Slaod tanaí’, a thugann sí air,  
í ag tóraíocht go cúramach i measc na bhfocal.  
‘Brat gléineach, ábhar silteach, rud fliuch.’

## Leide Beag

Dá gcaithfeá faid do mharthana iomláin'  
ag cúléisteacht leis an murúch  
b'fhéidir go bhfaighfeá leide beag anseo is ansiúd  
cár bh as di. Thángas-sa aniar aduaidh  
uirthi lá fómhair is a naíonán  
á bréagadh faoina seál aici.

'Ní tú éan gorm na mbainirseach,  
ní tú gearrcach glas na gcaobach,  
ní tú coileán an mhadra uisce,  
ní tú lao na maoile caoile',

an shuantraí a bhí á chanadh aici  
ach do stop sí suas láithreach bonn  
chomh luath is a thuig sí  
duine eile a bheith ar an bport.

Tuigeadh dom gur ghlac sí náire  
i dtaobh é bheith cloiste agam in aon chor.  
Tuigeadh domh chomh maith go raibh blas an-láidir  
den bhfarraige air mar shuantraí ar an gcéad scór.

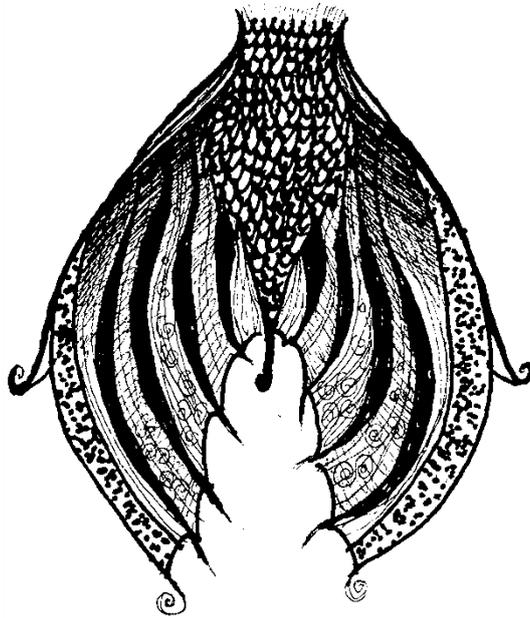
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PAUL MULDOON

# The Assimilated Merfolk



Translated from  
**Na Murúcha a Thriomaigh**  
by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

## **The Mermaid in the Hospital**

She awoke  
to find her fishtail  
clean gone  
but in the bed with her  
were two long, cold thingammies.  
You'd have thought they were tangles of kelp  
or collops of ham.

'They're no doubt  
taking the piss,  
it being New Year's Eve.  
Half the staff legless  
with drink  
and the other half  
playing pranks.  
Still, this is taking it  
a bit far.'

And with that she hurled  
the two thingammies out of the room.

But here's the thing  
she still doesn't get –  
why she tumbled out after them  
arse-over-tip...  
How she was connected  
to those two thingammies  
and how they were connected  
to her.

It was the sister who gave her the wink  
and let her know what was what.  
'You have one leg attached to you there  
and another one underneath that.  
One leg, two legs...  
A-one and a-two...  
Now you have to learn  
what they can do.'

In the long months  
that followed,  
I wonder if her heart fell  
the way her arches fell,  
her instep arches.

## The Mermaid and Certain Words

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.

She hates nothing so much  
as being reminded of the underwater life that she  
led  
before she turned over a new leaf on dry land.  
She totally denies  
that she had the slightest connection with it  
at any time. 'I never had any interest  
in those old superstitions, or any of the old  
traditions.

Fresh air, knowledge, the shining brightness of  
science  
are all I ever hankered after.'

I wouldn't mind one way or the other but I myself  
have  
found her out  
in the deception.

In the Department of Irish Folklore  
in University College, Dublin,  
there is a whole manuscript in the Schools'  
Collection  
that was set down by her,  
written in water, with the fin of a ray for a pen,  
on a long scroll of kelp.

In it can be found thirteen long tales  
and odds and ends of other ones, together with  
charms, old prayers, riddles and such.  
From her father and her grandmother she mostly  
took them down.

She refuses to accept its existence, and when she  
does,  
'It was the master who gave it to us as homework,  
way back in the National School.  
We had to do it.'

She would prefer to suffer a heavy nosebleed  
rather than admit she ever had a hand in its  
composition.

### **A Recovered Memory of Water**

Sometimes when the mermaid's daughter  
is in the bathroom  
cleaning her teeth with a thick brush  
and baking soda  
she has the sense the room is filling  
with water.

It starts at her feet and ankles  
and slides further and further up  
over her thighs and hips and waist.  
In no time  
it's up to her oxters  
She bends down into it to pick up  
handtowels and washcloths and all such things  
as are sodden with it.

They all look like seaweed –  
like those long strands of kelp that used to be  
called

'mermaid hair' or 'foxtail'.  
Just as suddenly the water recedes  
and in no time  
the room's completely dry again.

A terrible sense of stress  
is part and parcel of these emotions.  
At the end of the day she has nothing else  
to compare it to.  
She doesn't have the vocabulary for any of it.  
At her weekly therapy session  
she has more than enough to be going on with  
just to describe this strange phenomenon  
and to express it properly  
to the psychiatrist.

She doesn't have the terminology  
or any of the points of reference  
or any word at all that would give the slightest  
suggestion  
as to what water might be.  
'A transparent liquid', she says, doing as best she  
can.  
'Right', says the therapist, 'keep going'.  
He coaxes and cajoles her towards word-making.  
She has another run at it.  
'A thin flow', she calls it,  
casting about gingerly in the midst of words.  
'A shiny film. Dripping stuff. Something wet'.

## **A Tiny Clue**

You could spend your entire life  
eavesdropping on the mermaid  
before you'd pick up the tiniest little clue  
about where she was really from. One autumn day  
I happened upon  
her and her child  
while she was comforting it under her shawl.

'You are not the blue-green pup of the seal.  
You are not the grey chick of the greater black-backed gull.  
You are not the kit of the otter. Nor are you  
the calf of the slender hornless cow.'

This was the lullaby she was singing  
but she stopped short  
immediately she realized  
someone else was in the neighbourhood.

I had a distinct sense she was embarrassed  
I'd overheard her in the first place.  
I also came away with the impression  
the lullaby was, to put it mildly, redolent of the sea.