**The Assimilated Merfolk**

**translated by Paul Muldoon**

**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.