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## The Woman & the Animal Trope

**A critical selection of contemporary Irish poetry by Manuela Palacios-González, Margarita Estévez-Saá and Noemí Pereira-Ares**

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In these times of growing ecological awareness, one feels impelled to reflect upon the ways in which contemporary Irish poetry is conceiving and shaping the relationship between human and non-human animal life. Furthermore, social debates about animals' rights run parallel to inquiries into interconnected forms of oppression and exploitation, as is the case with the discrimination of women around the world (Velasco Sesma 2017). Feminist thought has focused on two – not necessarily incompatible –, strategies: one resulting from the urgency to denounce the patriarchal animalization of women – their bodies and their social roles – (Adams 1990), and the other aiming to question anthropocentric, speciesist ideologies that privilege human interests over those of animals (Braidotti 2017).

The following poems by contemporary Irish writers have been selected on account of their varied explorations of the relation between woman and animal. Myths and legends, some of which render women's metamorphosis into animals as a patriarchal punishment, are revisited and rewritten from a contemporary perspective. Alternatively, mass culture animal tropes, such as Spiderwoman, may provide empowering avatars for women in the cosmopolitan, multicultural metropolis. The animal trope often raises questions about our corporeality and the conflicting discourses on women's bodies and female desire – our animality being unrelentingly repressed and concealed. As we observe animal life, we may notice our shared vulnerability and the continuous state of alertness we must live in, but other animal tropes in this selection, such as seals, selkies and mermaids also conjure up a fearless and resolute vindication of our animality. As the Irish poet Grace Wells, included in this selection, maintains: "I have an unfinished a poem about a mermaid, with the line in it, 'A woman must never be pure animal. But half is possible'. I feel that half of our psyche unwillingly accepts the world as it is, and the other half looks for liberation. The animal, the mermaid, the selkie, they all speak to that wild part of us which longs for a better world".

Although ordered by date of publication, readers will find illuminating resemblances and correspondences among poems written over a span of thirty years, from the auspicious decade of the 1990s, which witnessed an unprecedented rise in the number of Irish women writers, until very recently – the last selected poem being from 2019.

## Mary O'Donnell

### Spiderwoman's Third Avenue Rhapsody

#### *Allegro appassionato cantabile e molto tenuta la melodia*

Out into swirling September,  
 across blue night streets,  
 rumbling Gorgons beneath,  
 their steam raging through man-holes,  
 or cracks in kerbs.  
 The drumming of Manhattan,  
     salsa-music,  
 and me stepping down  
 at last to inhabit the body  
     I forgot I had.

EXTRA! EXTRA!  
 Woman Firing on All Four Cylinders!  
 Third Avenue Bionic Woman!  
 Woman Released from Her Own Conundrums!  
 Suddenly I have lips, limbs, hips,  
 ears like trumpet-lilies blooming  
 to the sound of blues and soul,  
 the throb of bars and restaurants.  
 Beneath my clothes, new skin,  
 beneath that skin, oxygen.  
 The lobes of my lungs breathe city decorums,  
 antennae sprout from my forehead;  
 outside, the world staked confidently  
     on concrete ladders  
     that lead to the stars  
     each rung  
 a yellow light in someone's window.

#### *Moderato*

EXTRA! SPIDERWOMAN SCALES FORTY-STOREY BLOCK  
     legs black-furred and glossy,  
 she turns, open armed  
 to view the chimera of a dioxide sunset,  
 then parachutes down the airways  
     on her own web.  
 EXTRA! EXTRA! SPIDERWOMAN ENTERS RESTAURANT!  
     *La Bolina*, a hostess  
 with hoops through her ear-lobes –  
 the tan – the white smile –  
 the bright-eyed vacancy that ignores  
 arachnid appetites,  
 and yes, yes, yes,

SPIDERWOMAN SELECTS FRESH TUNA STEAK,  
 and should I die before I wake  
     there is nothing like it,  
     nothing, save good sex,  
 such succulent flakes of flesh,  
 a salad moist as happy dreams.

*Allegro con brio*  
*espressivo*

Wined and dined, EXTRA! EXTRA!  
 SPIDERWOMAN TAKES SUBWAY TO TIMES SQUARE!  
 sheds black leggings, her octal scuttle,  
     down 42<sup>nd</sup> street, the heat,  
     the grease, black dawgs  
     hunting meat,

‘Hey baby, ah suck pussy!’ (*cres.*),  
 his filigree touch at my elbow,  
 this sandal-footed dandy with cock for sale  
 and knowing eyes, moves on,  
 his limbs gyrate too-daah-riddim-babe  
     (*cres. ff*)  
 Metropolitan hucksters, sex-menu,

*One-Hour Fuck, Family Viewings, Tits-A-Go-Go,*  
*Pussy Galore! Oriental Girls,*  
*Anything U Want!*

Chime and cowries tinkle, open doorway,  
 the rankness of goatskins,  
 Spiderwoman peers inside (*piu rit.*),  
 there’s the Mandarin of Manhattan,  
 formerly of Chin-Kuah-Hin, Vietnam,  
     his extensive whiskers,  
     his sweet incense,  
     his child wife,  
 eyes that know a spider in women’s clothing,  
 his crystals arranged in shimmering codes –  
 Chinese cures, root-ginger, ginseng,  
 ground antler, tiger’s penis (*dim. e rit.*)  
*Restores energy, guarantees long life*  
*and potency!*

*Andante non tanto*

Where are you now, Anne Bradstreet,  
 whadd’ya think of this, proud pilgrim  
 with your terse verse?  
 The pussy-suckers, the traders,

this metropolitan chowder, fishy with  
Irish, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Asian,  
stingless WASPS. Hasidics, Reform, the Jews?

Look at me, Mistress Anne!

Look! My ears are trumpet-lilies,  
my eyes like bowls of sky,  
my skin a pond where I have drifted  
peacefully, on my back,  
a view of the stars  
between crags of scrapers!

Like you, I have come,  
I have learnt metamorphosis, I have come,  
dewy pilgrim in hope of prodigy,  
and look what marvels I have found!  
MYSELF! SPIDERWOMAN WALKS ON THE EAST RIVER!  
SPIDERWOMAN DISCOVERS HER SOUL!

Bet you won't approve, Anne babe.  
Don't be afraid,

O ancient Ms America,  
O New England first-corner

with our Bible, and poems  
that strained for voicing!  
You're still there,  
right here, among the salsa,  
the Bud Light, the crack 'n' the coke,  
sure you are,  
but you're still changing, baby,  
your great savage heart (the one you  
thought you'd tamed) smoulders with love  
on this demonic estate (*ritard.*),  
this dreaming, ocean prominence,  
this violet, scandal-lit place,  
this beautiful fakery,  
O wild Manhattan! (*cres. ff*)

From *Spiderwoman's Third Avenue Rhapsody*. Dublin: Salmon Poetry, 1993.

## Celia de Fréine

### Ar mhuin an albatrais

Ar an tríú lá láithrigh créatúr draíochta os cionn  
na loinge. Scáthaigh sí a súile óna lios órga  
is é ag teacht d'fhoighdeán anuas ar an ngob.  
Rad na mairnéalaigh tarcaisní chuige.  
Smaoinigh an cócaire go mbeadh sé sách mór  
leis an gcriú iomlán a chothú go ceann seachtaine  
murach a ghné righin – bhí a ngumaísiúd  
seargtha, a gcuid fiacla ar bogadh.  
Dar leis an mionoifigeach, bholgfadh  
a chuid cleití cuilt, nó dosaen babhstar  
ar a laghad, ach amháin go mbeadh  
na dealga ag gobadh amach astu.  
Lean an díospóireacht ar feadh an lae agus thar  
oíche. Le héirí na gréine scréach mairnéalach  
mullaigh: Maraigh agus báigh an bodach  
nó tarraingeoidh sé drochrath orainn.  
Na vótaí á gcitheamh acu, dhruid sí  
i leith an fhara, is thug faoi deara  
súil chlé an éin á caochadh uirthi –  
é sin, nó leid á tabhairt aige di.  
Scar sí a cosa thar a churcaí uachtarúla,  
is neadaigh a glúine isteach ina chosa cleite  
gur mhothaigh cuisle a chroí ag preabadh,  
is an bheirt acu ag éirí i dtreo na gréine.

From *Faoi Chabáistí is Ríonacha*. An Spidéal, Co. Galway: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2001.

## Celia de Fréine

(Celia de Fréine's self-translation of "Ar mhuin an albatrais")

### Ascending the Albatross

On the third day a fabulous creature appeared  
above the ship. She shaded her eyes from  
its golden aura as it swooped towards the prow.  
The sailors hurled insults and abuse.

It would be big enough – the cook speculated –  
to feed the entire crew for a week  
but it looked tough and their gums  
had shrivelled, their teeth grown loose.

Its feathers would stuff a quilt  
or a dozen bolsters – at least –  
insisted the petty officer  
but the spines would protrude.

Debate continued throughout the day  
and into the night. Towards dawn  
an able seaman cried: *Kill and drown  
the bugger. It will only bring bad luck.*

As votes were cast  
she approached the bird on its perch  
and noticed a flicker in the left eye –  
either that or a wink.

Throwing her leg over creamy plumes  
she nestled her knees deep within  
its quills and felt its heart beat  
as together they soared towards the sun.

From *Faoi Chabáistí is Ríonacha*. An Spidéal, Co. Galway: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2001.

## Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

### An Mhurúch san Ospidéal

Dhúisigh sí  
 agus ní raibh a heireaball éise 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 á 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?

From *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*. Poems in Irish by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, translated by Paul Muldoon. Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 2007.

## Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill

(Paul Muldoon's translation of "An Mhurúch san Ospidéal")

### 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,  
in 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.  
On 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.

From *The Fifty Minute Mermaid*. Poems in Irish by Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, translated by Paul Muldoon. Loughcrew, Oldcastle, Co. Meath: The Gallery Press, 2007.

## Dorothy Molloy

### Long-Distance Swimmer

Hungry for water she lowers herself  
into lakes.

She stares at her face in the mere.

Bare but for Speedos and membrane-like cap,  
she divines  
where to go by a trembling of hands,

follows a ley-line through bog-hole and quarry  
and dam.

She hangs Holy Marys on bushes,

she wades through the slob, descends the dank steps  
to the well.

Cheered on by St. Gobnait and nine grazing

deer, a badger, an otter, a fox and a  
hare,

she dives into rivers, she butterflies

over the weir. She crawls up canals.

Rises and

falls at the lock. When the keeper has

opened the gates with this hydraulic key,

she shakes herself

loose of her togs and her cap.

Her neck disappears. She turns grey. Grows a fur coat  
and claws.

Her limbs fuse in a silvery flash

as she swims for dear life out to sea.

From *Long-distance Swimmer*. Cliffs of Moher, Co. Clare: Salmon Poetry, 2009.

**Victoria Kennefick****Beached Whale**

At first I thought that enormous lump of red-brown on the sand  
was the trunk of some ancient, washed-up tree.

It was only when I mounted the object,  
digging my little hands into something far too pliable,  
that it hit me, the stale smell of a thousand low tides

and the mute open mouths of the many onlookers  
with their hysterical dogs, the seagulls circling like squalling clouds,  
my mother's curlew scream as she ran towards me, disjointed.

Astride the whale like this,  
looking at my mother move through dimensions,  
planes of distance,

I thought of boutique dressing rooms filled to the brim  
with tension and clothes, like gas, expanding. And two little girls  
watching their mother cry at her reflection distorted in a fluorescent mirror.

The weight of her past made flesh on her hips,  
the scars of our arrivals barely healed after all this time,  
my blind hands all over the body.

Grasping, desperate to hold onto something real,  
not knowing what that was.

From *White Whale*. Cork: Southword Editions, 2015.

## Grace Wells

### Selkie Moment

She rose from the warmth of their bed,  
in the kitchen cut her hair,

the loss of it could not sever love  
for holding him she'd held the cultured world—

only she had found where he kept her pelt  
beneath the dry earth of their barn.

Shrunken, matted, its pulse gone—  
but a claw still scratched

and the scratch called for salt and change.  
She put the skin onto her back

walked out into darkness. Seal-headed,  
swam beneath the myriad brilliant stars.

From *Fur*. Dublin: The Dedalus Press, 2015.

## Doireann Ní Ghríofa

### Baleen

When I turned thirteen, I left behind my girlish dress.  
 Mother frowned, still in her mourning gown and beads of jet.  
 She sent servants to the city to choose clothes for me,  
 petticoats of coarse horsehair and cotton crinolines,

all the creaky constructions that cage  
 our bodies— corsets, hoops, layered  
 skirts, petticoats — how well hidden,  
 our hearts. I grew new smells like periwinkles.

Now, each morning, a girl assembles my second skeleton  
 piece by piece, suspends it over my narrow person,  
 tightens the corset of whalebone that constricts  
 the curve of my ribs.

She shrinks me. I watch her eyes as she tugs the stays.  
 I want her to touch my face.  
 Her fingers are fast, deft  
 as she pulls belly to backbone, tightens my breasts.

I tell her that though we call it whalebone, corset-stays  
 are made of baleen, a whale's mouth-bristles splayed  
 to dredge fish from vast saltwater sprawl.  
 She does not reply. I tell her that yesterday, I saw

a whale beached in crumpled newsprint,  
 men pointing, puzzling over how to dispose of it.  
 I don't tell her about my dream, dozens of ladies  
 unclothed, dashing over the shore in bare feet

to roll into the monstrous mouth of a whale and twist  
 themselves through baleen and whales-spit.  
 In the dream, we stood together, she and I, with candles  
 in each hand that cast shadows into ocean blackness.

My room seemed so much darker when I woke, alone.  
 Dark as a mouth, the wardrobe hung open.  
 Inside, the corsets gleamed,  
 white and silent as teeth.

Published in *The Level Crossing* 1. The Dedalus Press, 2016.

## Annemarie Ní Churreáin

### The Kerry Foot

*at Cahir Saidhbhín\**

It began with a foot,  
thrown up out of the underworld,  
as ceremonious  
as a stone,  
one morning on the shore  
of Fort Saidhbhín, 1984.

This was a warning foot,  
a foot of other parts to come;

a foot before fifteen-year-old Ann  
died in the grotto giving birth;  
a foot before Joanne  
circled on a map  
for the court  
each bog-lane  
in which an act had occurred;  
a foot before the broadcast on RTÉ  
of statues weeping blood.

This was the fortune foot of Saidhbhín,  
who set a hoof  
into the centre of a soldier's fort  
to win her human body back.  
One touch of the earth  
and the hide fell  
from her bones.

This foot marked the sand  
where soon the air was about to become  
animal again.

And as the air hissing salt  
rose on its hinds  
against the bay,

the Kerry Foot without a name  
was placed into an unmarked grave.  
Already the body had been claimed  
and grieved enough.

\**Cahir Saidhbhín* translates from Irish as *Fort of Little Sadhbh*. In Irish legend, Sadhbh was the mother of Oisín. She appears in stories both in human and deer form.

In 1984, ‘The Kerry Babies’ story unfolded in Cahir Saidhbhín.

A few months before ‘The Kerry Babies’ story broke, it was reported that a single, human foot was found washed up on a shore at Cahir Saidhbhín.

From *Bloodroot*. Aille, Inverin, Co. Galway: Doire Press, 2017.

**Catherine Phil MacCarthy**

Eostre and Hare

The second she tilts her head  
removes sunglasses,  
I'm reminded

of how close I came  
to a hare sitting tall  
in the headland dawn

past Lissadell  
motionless in long grass,

eyes of yellow amber  
exposed on the uphill  
of an oval, profile,

the span of a field in its gaze,  
sight, sound, speed – entire being  
turned for escape.

From *Daughters of the House*. Dublin: The Dedalus Press, 2019.

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