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,
than 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 42nd 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)

**Celia de Fréine**

Ar mhuin an albatrais

Ar an tríú lá láithrigh créatúr draíochta os cionn na loinge. Scátháigh 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 íomlán a chothú go ceann seachtaine murach a ghné righin – bhí a ngumaísíúd 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.

Scarf 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 a bhí ag éirí i dtreo na gréine.

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.

An Mhurúch san Ospidéal

Dhúsigh sí
agus ní raibh a heireaball éiseann
níos mó
ach istigh sa leaba léi
bhf 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 seó 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 diot
agus ceann eile acu anseo thíos fút.
Cos, cos eile,
a haon, a dó.
Caitfhiadh tú foghlaím
conas síúl leo.’
Ins na míosa fada
a lean
n’fheadar ar thit a croí
de réir mar a thit
tráchta ná coise uirthi,
a háirse?

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, 
hers instep arches.

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 slobs, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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Annemarie Ní Churreáin

The Kerry Foot

*at Cahir Saidbhín*

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

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 Saidbhín,
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 Sadbh. In Irish legend, Sadbh was the mother of Oisín. She appears in stories both in human and deer form.


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.

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.

Works Cited

Wells, Grace. E-mail message in private correspondence with Manuela Palacios. 15/06/2020.

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