

THE NIMROD LITERARY AWARDS
The Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry

SEMI-FINALIST
ANNA LEAHY

Awash

Learning to Swim

Water, water, everywhere, and not a drop to drink.
— my grandmother and others

Who are we to be rudderless
without fins, held
in arms, in glances, in poses?

My father could not swim; my mother could.
Sometimes, it's best to close one's eyes,
become whole with fingers interlaced;

the power hardly jars us.
Breath glides like a hot knife.
Salt crystals emerge as our hair dries.

Ink

Felicia Hemans, 1818

She waves to the captain,
her breasts let down.
She imagines her infant

a harp held to her cleavage
before she jumps off a cliff,
falls with her face to the sky,

hands catching sun like salt through fingers.
She thinks ink is the color of the darkening ocean,
some poems drown some women,

children's voices break with frothy curls.
His sailing's no loss. In this imagined deep,
she sips until her lips split.

Evidence of Grace

Saint Eulalia, circa 304 A.D.

If a girl believes
the ocean is evidence of grace,
how can she swallow

her soliloquy? When a girl speaks out
of turn, she isn't well tolerated,
must set her hair on fire:

smoke signals like prayers. Smothered, she gives up.
From her open mouth flies a single bird.
Her body goes dark, becomes ash.

Snow settles to cool
her remains. If love were deserved, girls would be
always half full.

Lady of the Lighthouse

Ida Lewis, over a fifty-year career

Lady of the lighthouse, lady as the lookout: mistaken
sailors waiting, wet-weighted.
One, two: father strokes out.

Three, four: a good night's catch.
Five, six: save another batch.
Year after year, the darkness

brings men to her. She beaches men, pulls them
out of the breakers, out by their breeches.
Seven, eight: drowsy and doused.

Nine, ten: the dowry's spent.
 Eleven, twelve: hoist men drenched.
 Night after night, she lights the waves,

wastes her breath on the ancient sea,
 waits for mariners in the wake.
 The lantern dissolves. She sleeps at dawn.

Wife of a Whaler

Mary Patten, 1856

Wife of a whaler, wife
 on a warship, consort on a clipper,
 captive below deck, motion sick,

morning sick. The winds pick up,
 the ship drifts south, the ice glosses over.
 When her captain falls ill,

fails her, and the crew is at a loss,
 she navigates the Cape, is capable
 of anything. Nothing less will do.

She reads stars like stitches
 in the capacious night; she follows
 the seam to the edge of cloth.

If Wishes Were Waves

The Lusitania, 1915

She pans for death: the horizon
 moves, heads pendulate, slow bobbins
 unwind their thread, skin fails, teeth chatter,

crack, black skirts seep away.
 She is numb before she dies.
 Pulled from the sea or washed up,

the bodies are laid out
 exposed on the cobblestone and photographed.
 No one can tell who belongs to whom,

one body and then the next: depth of field.
 Does a woman with needle and thread
 prick a stitch into each eyelid to seal the sinking?

In Love and War

All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.

—On Photography, *Susan Sontag*

A good pilot in battle over water
 keeps flightplans bound in lead covers —
 if I have to ditch my bird, my heart,

my codes will sink quickly out of reach.
 Imagine the ocean's floor full of love's litter:
 the lead-laced intentions, someone's

Spitfire full of holes. Who am I to think
 I will make the return trip, wingtip
 to wingtip with another lucky crew,

my gunners spreading fire in our track,
 my photographers collecting images
 I have no time to see for myself?

If I dare to look back, I will see I made mistakes,
 miscalculated my attitude by a few degrees,
 nagged his shore too soon after dusk.

Who's to say which sordid sortie will do me in,
 leave me thirsty in some unromantic liferaft,
 the lusty propeller noise distancing itself?

The Physics of Denouement

Marie Curie, 1910

Speed and duration cause mood swings.
Gravity and pressure, heartbreak.
Dragged by the air,
caught up and then pulled away
in repeated effort and failure,
water seems blue when it has depth.

The Waves

Virginia Woolf, 1951

She cannot pay attention
to much but the water's luscious
slapping, the chaos
and the rhythm emerging only to fail,
like lead geese falling back, replaced,
or like a crowd clapping, hands
in and out of sync. She tries to adjust to the sound
of *inseparable* as if hearing is enough
to make sense of herself.

My Mother's Mermaid

Esther Williams, circa 1946

She is sequined and slicked down
with emeralds in her hair, mouth
puckered and wordless red.
A wave of her hand, music strikes up.
A chorus line loops below, the body in water
with so many legs spreading:

she dives, sparkles, swims like virtue,
crotches like roofbeams above.
The water rushes her teeth.

She rises like a voice from a clear throat
as if passion were Technicolor myth,
as if the sea were the means

for the story I tell
instead of the story itself,
the thing that tells me.



From the collection of the Editor-in-Chief, photograph

Acknowledgments: “In Love and War” appeared in *Turns About a Point* (Finishing Line Press) and “My Mother’s Mermaid” appeared in *dirtcakes*; they are included in “Awash” with permission.