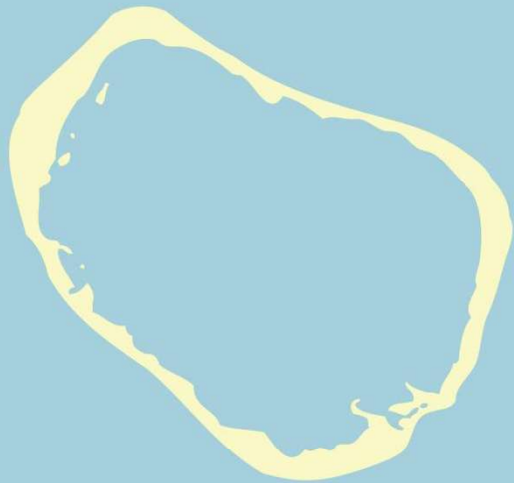


# ATOLL

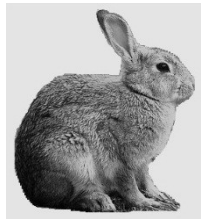
*Dylan Brennan*



SMITHEREENS PRESS

# Atoll

Dylan Brennan



Smithereens Press 10

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Atoll

## Silent Birth

*after Popol Vuh*

It is silent, calm, hushed  
on the soft ripples of the waters

It is silent, calm, hushed  
in the womb-sky above

Unfathomable absence –  
pools that pool in darkness

These things, these things

Only womb-sky exists  
there is no plate of earth

Only ripples in the darkness  
there are no banks of sand

Waters calm and hushed –  
a need to fill the void

## Tabula Rasa

Oceanic dispersal. The potential of a heliotropic  
universe encased within each capsule,

perhaps from Revillagigedo or the Galapagos,  
its salt-tolerant seeds floated to this ribbon of land.

I imagine the ornithologist's soft treading  
upon *luxuriant mats of goatsfoot morning-glory*,

his pig extirpation programme and unprophetic  
nightmare of a pregnant sow he'd left behind.

Beneath the manic trample of a million land crabs  
the limbs of a pantropical creeping vine

cling to extinct polyps of coralline limestone,  
internal advance halted by the brackish waters

of Clipperton's heart. Beyond the surrounding  
sedge marshes a lesser man-o-war bird inflates

its exuberant chest and fluttering, perhaps, between  
the pinnacles, a ruddy turnstone in post-nuptial plumage.

## Alicia Rovira Arnaud

A sliced blood orange on a slow descent  
trickles its rivulets across the flat towel  
of the ocean. Diluted streams fade into  
the immense. A brown jaggery sugar  
fashioned from the boiled sap of palm  
fronds is eaten at sundown to sweeten  
the melancholy of sleep on a desolate atoll.  
The men smoke dried bark and drink  
firewater toddy until the waves  
come to a halt and limestone sways  
instead of the salt horizon. Warm totems  
with a soft pulse, on our tiny volcanic peak,  
only we can know the true scale of things.  
Each morning our cabin dawns closer to the surf.

## Bodies of Water

From Trasimeno to Rockall

all bodies of water deepen  
in the absence of a solar device.

Would you survive here  
in the centre of a lake –

you, with your groping necessity  
for live flesh in the dark?

Would you hurtle through space?

Would you wade out into blackness  
throat deep in amniotic ink?

Would your lungs remember  
how once they breathed fluid

or would you stretch out  
to grab this hand

begging to be dragged home  
across scorched earth?

## San Feliciano

Linear flicker of an imagined  
forest fire horizon

unquenched streetlights rest  
upon our lake's dark blanket

from which we are separated  
by a wall of transparent plastic

## Lighthouse King

The other men have been  
swallowed by sharks  
or benevolent waves  
and now I am king  
and how could I not be?

Each girl is my bride.  
Each neck adorned  
with the crushed shells  
of terracotta land crabs,  
poisonous flesh removed.

Away from the vile universe  
of flat seas  
turn all eyes  
lagoonwards  
to our perforated heart.

From  
    my  
        tower  
I am the light of the world.

Pray never to be found.

## Plastic Virgins of Xochimilco

Living eyes and a soft belly – my first doll was warm and fleshy.  
She was taken by the water.

Oh Blessed Virgin of the Wetlands! Oh Lord Acocil!  
Too long with things that squirm in water.

Blue-eyed porcelain saints, madonnas and infants,  
they watch me while I sleep, plastic virgins their playmates.

My plastic virgins protect me from harm.  
My plastic virgins will bring her back home.

My plastic virgins prohibit my sins as their hair grows long.

I've seen it entwine with the roots of bonpland willows,  
tezontle helps it sink low-down to soft beds of water-earth.

Foetus-fingered tendrils curl around flora and pebbles –  
cross-pollinated anchors, tenacious and frail.

Our Lady of the Axolotl! Amphibious Brother of Quetzalcoatl!  
Regenerator of Limbs! Make her flesh whole again.

But no, this has gone on for too long and I am tired.  
The colour drains from their cheeks and rags.

Hollow and dead, the carp-eyes of severed heads  
are blurred by translucent membranes of cobwebs –

spinneret-gland silk, like myself, grown old and grey.  
The canals under the clouds of a violent August.

I am as the wandering woman that I've feared since birth –  
a *llorona* of the daytime, visible trails of whispers in my wake.

Lately I've seen the warm fingers of a siren beckon  
from beneath a *seeable-down-into* surface.

She knows where my first doll plays. I will go to her.



## Now In Rainbows

*i.m. Garo*

Upon the sedimentary base of the Río Grande  
or Río Bravo (depending on your line of approach)  
his corpse was found. It probably stank.  
It was probably bloated and purple  
and was definitely shackled.

As they dragged the thing  
that used to be him  
to the twinkling surface  
filthy liquids that had soaked  
and stained his white cotton socks  
must have streamed  
from his trainers  
through shoelace holes  
and from his nostrils and pockets  
rendering business cards or,  
more likely, scraps of paper  
with scribbled names and numbers,  
illegible and pointless.

From Brownsville to Matamoros  
he had crossed to visit his parents.  
There were signs of torture.  
He had rented a car.

Like others I decided not  
to attend his funeral.  
I hardly knew him I told myself.  
He stayed in Condesa  
for three days and nights  
when down for the *In Rainbows* tour.  
The last text I sent  
was about moving  
gear from my couch  
at the agreed-upon hour.

Every death is an unacceptable affront.  
The inexplicable murder  
of a young orchestral conductor  
is a dark leaden palm  
that pushes down on the lungs.

Let it be known and understood –  
there is nothing to be learned  
from this.

## The Elephants at Blacksod

Not the weeping river-cows  
of the tropics

but exuberant child-giants  
splashing the salt

and foam of the Atlantic.  
You joined them

gawping back to land  
like fools to the spice routes

as the surf flooded mudless  
pachyderm crevices

before trickling  
to a dark silver you remembered

in the silt and glimmer  
of a Greenlandic estuary.

The imagined transformation  
of sixteen columnar legs

to plesiosauroid fins  
and a submerged head

as lagan buoyed by the flesh  
of grey lily-pads.

They could have been  
twin manta rays

flapping on a deck,  
oxygenless and cold.

The panicky right-left  
of a proboscival snorkel

was all that could remind you  
of mammalian nature.

## The Edges of Things

Before finding the blubber tasted

best when eaten cold and raw  
in the freshness of the night

seal meat was roasted on a flame  
kindled after the Indian manner.

Accompanied by a hitherto  
undiscovered species of fig

the mawkish cream of mammal  
fat gave succour to three men

on the verge of slumber's murk.

Huddled around the newly-dug  
well at the centre of that island

through white sand they drank  
algid water with cupped hands

and told stories of *el cuco*  
and muscular sea monsters.

## The Sea of Steinbeck

The warm linguini of the turbellaria,  
lacerated ankles in the hot seawater,

a stingray barb between the toes,  
he found life in littoral zones.

Fiddler Crabs, Sally Lightfoots, Dark Gorgonians –  
better an orgy of squirming things

to a soon-to-be-ex-wife or the cold snot  
of a plucked gastropod upon a metallic table.

Each night he steeped his knuckles  
for a vital sting and turned his eyes

from the rock-pools to the stars  
and from the stars to the rock-pools.

## Atoll

You salty in my mouth –  
                                  a warm mollusc  
offered by the tide.

## *Notes and Acknowledgements*

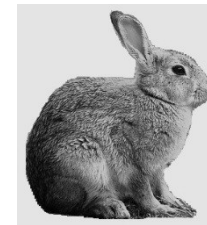
'Tabula Rasa', 'Alicia Rovira Arnaud', 'Atoll', and 'Lighthouse King' are inspired by the astonishing history of the inhabitants of Clipperton Island. 'Tabula Rasa' contains a quotation from an ornithological report by Julian Dodson, who killed all the pigs on the island in order to allow the Goat's Foot Morning Glory (*Ipomoea pes-caprae*) to grow and shelter crabs and bird eggs. As he left Clipperton, Dodson worried he may have left a pregnant sow behind.

Thanks are due to the editors of the following publications where a number of these poems first appeared: *Poetry Ireland Review*, *The Penny Dreadful*, *Burning Bush 2*, *Revival Literary Journal* & *The New Binary Press Anthology of Poetry: Volume I*.



From the unfathomable darkness of a primordial ocean to the US-Mexico border river; from the forsaken inhabitants of Clipperton Island to circus elephants swimming off the west coast of Ireland; the twelve poems of *Atoll*, with their tales of community and abandonment, are steeped in the waters of life and death.

Dylan Brennan's poetry and prose have been published in a range of Irish and international journals, in English and Spanish. His first full collection, *Blood Oranges*, will be published in late 2014 by The Dreadful Press ([thepennydreadful.org](http://thepennydreadful.org)). He has been shortlisted for the Fish Short Memoir Prize and has taken part in the Poetry Ireland Introductions Series. In 2015, his co-edited volume of essays on the work of Juan Rulfo will be published by Legenda. He lives and works in Mexico. [dylanbrennan.org](http://dylanbrennan.org)



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