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## Poems

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## Poems

### **Abstract**

FROM NINETIES, SONGS FROM THE DROWNED BOOK

# Sean O'Brien

## FROM NINETIES

i

Let's drift again in these vast solitudes,  
 The beer-and-tabs Sargasso of the shore,  
 Anachronistic legal waterholes  
 Down foggy chares alleged to have two ends –  
 We'll make a life's work of an evening out.  
 Let booths and gantries frame a ruined court  
 That grants our bores' and lone derangers' pleas  
 A hearing, though the verdict is the clock's  
 Long boxes, six black horses, frosty plumes.  
 The diggers leaning on their spades to smoke.  
 Far overhead, a coal train grinds its way  
 Across the viaduct. A grimy clang  
 From the cathedral, echoed. Please call home.  
 Tonight's the nineteenth century *sans* crowds,  
 A boozers' heaven lit by blue dog-stars  
 Whose image in the empty river draws  
 Fanatics to the bridges for dispatch –  
 Spent gambling men we used to read about,  
 They seem to wear our faces as they plunge  
 In sequence from the parapets, as though  
 To cancel with a gesture thirty years  
 Drunk dry with infidelity and waste.  
 They print the water with their leader-dots ...  
 Theirs was the truly historical work,  
 The ground on which we are arraigned tonight –  
 Since we've outlived both usefulness and art –  
 A failure to imagine properly  
 Our place in the supporting cast, to move  
 From *rhubarb* to the boneyard in a blink ...

*As if there might be politics afoot,  
 The night the southside arsenal went up  
 The people thronged the quays like citizens.  
 Blood-lit in the inferno of the towns  
 They hailed their unimportant misery.  
 The river boiled red-black past walls of flame  
 And watermen like local Charons cried  
 Beneath the stairs for passing trade, their arms*

*Outspread like angels in the burning rain  
Of lath and plaster, flesh and cobblestones  
That blinded the cathedral weathercocks  
And put the heat on whore and judge alike.*

Or so the picture shows, that no one sees,  
Crammed in beside a turning of the stairs:  
Old Testament confusion, modern dress,  
And on his non-existent crag, the bard  
Who's too far gone to say he told them so.

ii

Your hundred streets, your twenty names, all gone.  
A stink of burning sofas in the rain,  
Of pissed-on mattresses, and poverty's  
Spilt milk, its tiny airless rooms designed  
To illustrate the nature of subjection  
To its subjects. They tell me politics  
And history are done: here's grease  
Extruded from the dripping tar-skinned walls  
Of workingmen's hotels; the ropes of hair  
Trapped in the sinks; the names perpetually denied  
A hearing, waiting in the smoky halls  
For their appointments with an age that bred  
And killed and then forgot them – names that now  
Forget themselves, the air's mere allegations,  
Faces that the mirrors do not hold,  
Lockers with no contents, neither razors  
Nor the Bible nor an envelope of dimps  
Preserved against the certainty of worse.  
So Billy, Tommy, Jackie – did you live?  
Could it be you that Benjamin's  
Averted angel is ignoring now  
As once again you leave your flooded graves  
Like newsreel ghosts to greet the Kaiser's guns?

iii

Blind walls and hidden roadways running down  
To water. Black windows wedged with newsprint,  
Morning after morning of the afterlife,  
Anacoluthon of streets and bars.  
The bar as survival, as figment,  
Dog on the shelf and women to rights,  
The Hole in the Corner where dead men meet,

The dead of emphysema  
 And of pneumoconiosis,  
     bickering  
 Beyond the grave like kids,

There is football, or football. Occasional boxing:  
 Pale-skinned Jimmy Wildes and Woodcocks  
 Brave as owt  
     and carefully done down,  
 A lesson you have to pretend you've forgotten.

Or else there was Hitler, that flag-waving cunt.  
 Should have been a referee. Should have been hung  
 By the balls and then shot at. The Jarmans want tellt.

Eternity's offside, a lockout.  
 It's stilted black coal-staithes becoming aesthetics.  
 It's the exacerbated calm,  
 The grey summer nights at the end of the world  
 Through which an old bloke walks his dog  
 Across that shitty stretch of no man's grass  
 Because it's his vocation,  
 Middle distant citizen of patience.

## SONGS FROM *THE DROWNED BOOK*

i

In the beginning was all underwater,  
 The down-there-not-talked-about-time,  
 Deep North its drowned masonic book  
 And inaudible bubbles of speech,

Creation a diving-bell seeking its level  
 Down stone under stone, the slick passages  
 Fronded by greenery, flashlit by ore  
 And acetylene candles –

The blind fishes' luminous ballroom,  
 The pillars of coal, the salt adits, the lead oubliette of the core  
 And the doors upon doors, all lost  
 To the surface long since, with the language. Now  
 Is there anything there, underneath? Is there more?

ii

See

I can remember when  
All this was manuscript:

How

Down the green deep we tipped  
Law-clerks schoolmen state and church

And with them kingliness,  
The night we sank the crown  
Off Holderness.

Adam delved

And Dives swam

And sank, swam

And sank:

So who was then the gentle man?

Ourselves, or them

Whose deaths we drank?

iii

Name me a river.

*I'll name you a king.*

Then we shall drown him

And his God-given ring.

Drown him in Gaunless,

Drown him in Wear,

Drown him like Clarence,

Except we'll use beer.

Name me a river.

*I'll name you a price.*

River's not selling –

Take river's advice:

Dead if you cross me,

I'll not tell you twice.

My river's from heaven.

*Your river's been sold,**And your salmon have died**Drinking silver and gold.**Your river's a sewer,*

*A black ditch, a grave,  
And heaven won't lend you  
The price of a shave.*

iv

*(Baucis and Philemon in Longbenton)*

Hinny, mek wor a stotty cake,  
Wor needs it for wor bait.  
Hadaway, pet, away and shite:  
you'll have to fookin wait.  
Or mek yer stotty cake yerself  
If yer sae fookin smart.  
Aye, ah will, wor divvent need ye,  
Ya miserable tart.

v

*(From the Dive Bar of the Waterhouse)*

I was dreaming underwater  
When you swam into my bed:  
*How like you this? The tail, I mean,  
And my long hair, rich and red?*  
A naiad of the standing pools  
Of England's locked back yard,  
It is because of you, my dear,  
That makars live so hard.

*Sherry from Kular's (see beggars; see choose)  
Red Bidy, Thunderbird, non-booze booze,  
Hair oil, Harpic, shit in your shoes –  
It's casual drinking, it's paying your dues.*

*What would you give to know my name  
And speak it in your verse,  
And if I tell you, will it be  
A blessing or a curse?  
You are not the first, my dear,  
Nor will you be the last –  
Thousands sit for my exam  
But no one's ever passed.*