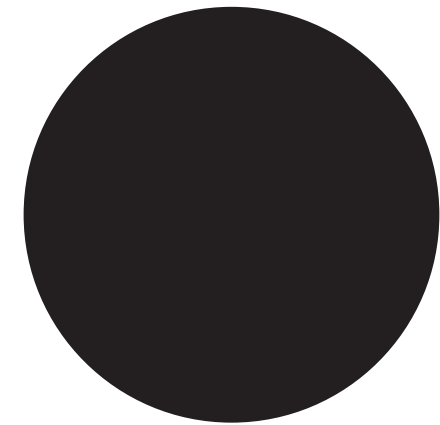
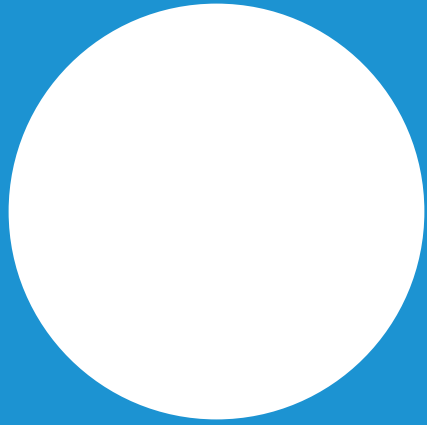


Clocks
Caitríona
O'Reilly



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We cannot think of a time that is oceanless.

T.S. Eliot

i. The Trial: John Harrison, 1735

Between the bells of Barrow and Humber
he passes forty summers. Forty Septembers:
 the stooks of barley cut and leaned,
 the bruised stubble of the fields smoking.
Along the empoldered, oozy foreshore,
among eelgrass, tree mallow, the snapped reed mace,
 he watches the giant hulks arrive, depart,
 their forested masts from which the rigging sags
hemp-strung, slung with salt-stiff linens.
They bring from Augsburg, from Hague and Amsterdam,
 the newest clocks with their curious workings:
 intricacies, not of the heart, but of the head,
since a clock is less a feeling than a thinking thing.
He knew this when, a fevered child,
 he heard the blood tick through his head
 on the dampened pillow, keeping time with the pocket watch
his father, for comfort, laid there.
As when, in sympathy, a pair of pendulums
 set side-by-side, fall ever into equal step.
 The thought had made him shiver.
Fame among the villages and farmsteads:
a local youth whose clever fingers could translate
 strange-sounding terms to a wooden vernacular:
 fusee, foliot, pinion, arbor –
one with an ear so fine he could be trusted
to pare error from the throats of bells,
 making the partials ring clear as chalk stream water:
 nominal, quint, tierce, prime.

1735. September. The final test.

A light northerly carries the stink of whale tallow

from the rendering yards of Hull. Out on the brown waters
he sets the gleaming bar bell balances in motion.

They rock soundlessly towards each other, then away,
driven apart by the wound fusee, united by helical steel;

regular as the breath of a quiet sleeper.

He observes that the machine “seems not to notice”

the barge’s pitch and roll on the choppy Humber.

The vast quernstone of the Lincolnshire sky

is turning above him, spilling its stars like fiery chaff –
and in the onrush of this alluvial moment he sees,

or seems to see, balanced between shore and shore,
not merely the Prize which is his heart’s desire,

but the whole wounded world, carved and rendered.

The delicate burnished instrument ticks on

as if in a dream where violence has ceased –

of temperature, motion, of the gradual insults of rust.

There is little else to do. He finds himself considering
another of his childhood’s curiosities:

a cake of calcite crystal, the Iceland spar

the locals say was dredged from Skitter mud.

Often he’d held it to his childish sight, and witnessed there
his mother doubled, her image not as in a glass

or millpond, but proximal: shadowed by her own pale ghost.

It had another trick: an ink-drop on its face

made a second, fainter twin, that darkened equally
as you revolved towards the sun.

When the rainclouds sagged like sacks of dirty wool

still it told faithfully the light’s direction –

the path of the sun, hallucinated in the eye of a bee.

He fancies it an ancient navigator’s tool

from when the Northmen’s sharp-nosed, clinkered skiffs
first penetrated the silty shallows, and entered the bloodstream.

Approaching midnight. Snug inside its oaken box,
the device has shown itself to be: exact. Just that.

Exact, and imperturbable.

The captain agrees it is time to weigh anchor for the South shore.

At his back, that portion of the river that has passed
passes forever, is subdued in lampleness.

ii. The Hull Time Ball

At the signal –

and

At the signal – a fix will be ^{given}
taken

The navigator is no longer adrift on the wide-waisted world
nor the physicist in the atom’s echoing spaces

(though she be forced to choose:

position/momentum momentum/position)

and the golden/coppery ball borne aloft by putti, like some
burdensome god, daily,

– a jumping-off point, a signal to begin, a starting gun –
dawdles to the top of its pole, then

drops

And at the signal –

the wave-function in the brain collapses, then

Time *t* (as the alchemist of the fens said)

is not “absolute, true, and mathematical”

but here, now, happening, happening –

part of a fabric that swarms with occur-

rence: like the tears of an Egyptian god
turning into gold bees
as the flower of the moment opens.

[At Paull, in the crook of the estuary's elbow,
we sat and watched the dredger labouring on the glittering
water
and the instant blinded me to my unmooring,
to the dark undertow that would carry me away]

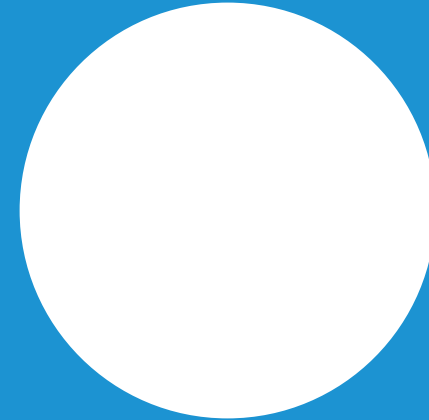
The coppery ball drops, and *at the signal* –
the prosperous merchant sets his pocket watch, the captain his chronometer,
an act of faith in the exactitude of clocks,
in their canonical hours.

[But to *pare error*, to eliminate friction
from the jewelled bearings, the oiled escapements,
the hair-fine precision needling past the atom's shell –
is it to grasp water?]

And the golden ball
a flower head gone over, a dandelion, opening
closing opening as a clock and all its parts moving
its shining filaments
its silken seeds tides and the wind carry away.



Caitríona O'Reilly was born in County Wicklow and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, where she completed a Ph.D. in American Literature. In 2002 she was awarded the Harper-Wood Studentship in English Literature from St. John's College Cambridge. She has published three collections of poetry with Bloodaxe Books. *The Nowhere Birds* (2001) was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best First Collection and was awarded the Rooney Prize in Irish Literature; *The Sea Cabinet* (2006), a Poetry Book Society Recommendation, was shortlisted for the *Irish Times* Poetry Now Award. *Geis* (2015) was a Poetry Book Society Recommendation and is jointly published by Bloodaxe Books and Wake Forest University Press in the United States. It was shortlisted for the 2016 Pigott Prize and was the winner of the 2016 *Irish Times* Poetry Now Prize. Her poetry has also been widely translated. Caitríona O'Reilly has written literary criticism for publications including *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Guardian*, and *The Irish Times*. She has taught poetry at institutions including Trinity College, Dublin, the University of York, Wake Forest University, and King's College, London. She is a former editor of *Poetry Ireland Review*. She lives in Lincolnshire.



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