

Participant 4: Annette Skade

Location 1: Sea view

Okay, so my first poem is 'Crossing': it's pretty self-evident what's going on in this poem, it's just about, you know, these many, many journeys that I've made over the Irish Sea over the years.

Crossing

Ferries, busy as spiders, spin across
this body of water: Stranraer to Larne, Dublin
to Holyhead, Rosslare to Pembroke Dock.
The threads of each journey rise
into a tarpaulin in the sky,
only visible on bad days like this.
Out at sea, I am lulled by the waves:

*rock my soul,
rock my soul,
oh, rock my soul.*

I'm dancing on the Dursey cable car,
waiting for the scheduled departure time.
My head keeps hitting the metal ceiling,
so I decide to leave. I want to fly
over the island, to see the EIRE sign,
picked out in quartz on the summit,
Risso's dolphins stream past the western tip.

Flying isn't so hard. Practice by lying
on the wind, or using your coat as a sail.
Once you have the confidence, tilt forward,
lift your legs and off you go, undulating
on low currents of air. Stay in your depth,
close enough to see each blade of grass.
High flying is for birds and angels.

You know this strange dream did actually occur when I was lying in a cabin on the ferry – and I think that that's probably why I dreamt of the cable car, because of the metal around me, you know? I don't know why, I woke up thinking that. And I also felt, when I woke up, 'so, that's where I belong! If I'm crossing, and what I'm dreaming about is the area that I live in, in Ireland, then I must be beginning to belong in that area.'

Location 2

So the next poem is called Sealink, and I wrote this at the time of Brexit, because I was thinking it doesn't really matter what the British government says, we *are* connected, you know? And this is about how we're all connected by water.

Sealink

Flat against horizon, angular as an origami swan,
the ferry to Holyhead dwarfs the Poolbeg lighthouse,
a blind shutting out a corridor of sky.
A light comes on; sheds onto massive hulls made
to slide along skyline from here to Mediterranean.

Juddering juggernauts churn the continental shelf,
slot into berths at the Liverpool docks, engines off;
cruise ships head for Venetian Lagoon,
super trawlers steam towards Norwegian fjords.
Solid as bricks, flighty as larks, they scarify the sea.

I'm a dolphin in the ferry's wake, skip from Rockall
to Malin to Fastnet, beyond the Bay of Biscay,
through the straits of Messina; lost in the call
of kittiwakes, gannets, sudden drop of puffin,
come to rest in the wheel of gulls above seawall.

With that poem, the reason I picked the places I've picked is because they're all places I've been. I spent some time in Italy, for example, and I looked out at the Straits of Messina. And the whole time I was there, looking at the sea, I used to think of myself as a stone that could skim all the way back to Ireland, you know? To the coastline where I live now. I'm very much into this idea of the sea as a connecting muscle between people. Where I live now in Beara, I live on a peninsula, and in the past people travelled from one place to another by boat – there's three peninsulas, or four peninsulas – down where we live, and to travel by road would have been almost impossible. But to travel by water was just the normal thing to do. So I think that's why this is firmly in my mind now. People around Pembroke Dock don't need to be convinced of this idea – it's because the terrain is so rough, and the roads would have been so bad in the past.

Location 3

Pembroke Dock

At last, the long granite Pembroke Dock wall is in front of you, and you turn in and follow it. It should be forbidding, but its massive blankness is a welcome sight, signalling the end of a long drive. You've seen it in the small hours of the morning, illuminated by streetlight, in the middle of the day, in all weathers. You've seen it with time to spare to park up and head into town for pub grub, you've seen it on the very last minute after roadworks and long delays. Such a long high wall, but if everyone who passed through its entrance gates left a handprint on it, you'd soon run out of room. The wall is like a citadel, but this one is not on a mountain top, it's at sea-level. It delineates a shift in scale from the town: the imposing Georgian buildings, the waiting ferry bigger than any ship I see in Bantry Bay where I live. The structures are huge, but so are the spaces – a place built for multitudes. The quayside allows a kind of decompression: training your eye to the distance, readying you for the sea's expanse. Inside this wall the rules are different. The speed limit slows, lorries get a lane to themselves, you stop/ go/ turn left or right/ according to the hand signals of workers wearing hi-viz.

I meet the ghosts of my younger travelling selves here. This was the port I left the UK from, over thirty years ago, to set up home on the Atlantic coast of Ireland, car crammed to the gills. There I am in the dockside pub after the train journey, so tired I want to sink into the pool table's green baize. That recent crossing where I brought over the things I chose from my mother's house, and a painted kitchen chair from her shed brought tears to my eyes. Or that time I only just made it, with a baby and toddler in tow, and no cabins left, and someone – who I like to think was the captain – gave us his cabin, with wide window facing front onto the sunset. All those waits. Sometimes standing outside the car to get the sea air, chatting with whoever was behind me in the queue – a doctor from Germany working in Limerick, or a biker and cage-fighter called Cyrus. For the 2 a.m. or early morning ferry you just roll down the car seats and sleep. Where else except a ferry-port would you find so many people asleep in their cars at the same time, all waking at the sound of ignition or the dock workers knock on the window?

The last time we skirted this wall, was in November 2019 to travel across the breadth of the UK to a poetry festival at Aldeburgh on the Suffolk coast. This road-trip brought me from my village, as far west as you can go in Ireland, to a town about as far east as you can go in England. At this "Coast to Coast to Coast" event I read with poets from all around the shores of the UK and Ireland. All the poets spoke of the sea. Ferries unite us.

You know where the car park now is at the station in Cork, I think that's the most similar place I've seen to Pembroke Dock. You actually turn, when you're driving, you turn into it quite late on, into that wall. It's going right as well as left, and you do a shortish right and follow the wall a short way, and then you're through these palatial gates which are warning you that there are all these amazing Georgian buildings on the inside. It's not anywhere as big as Dublin port, or it doesn't appear as big – but there's a lot more to it, I think, that I won't have even ever gone near. You know, I'm just making my way into the ferry area.

Location 4

I was thinking as well of how, over the years, I've made the journey part of it, you know, part of the enjoyment, by – one of the things I love to do from Pembroke Dock is to travel over the Brecon Beacons. So, say I'm on the middle of the night ferry, I get in at six in the morning, and then I just take a detour – I'm trying to think where you'd detour off, somewhere near Swansea anyway – drive over the Beacons. They look absolutely amazing at dawn. And then go to Brecon, and have some breakfast, for example. Or stop at Stokesay Castle on my way up to Manchester, it's one of my favourite old buildings, it's an old manor house. I've done lots of kind of different little stops over the years, just to enjoy that gorgeous countryside around there really. I stayed in Milford Haven once as well, with the kids, and just pottered around for a couple of days. There's an amazing jazz festival at Brecon. You have to be driving to go up through Brecon. And then sometimes I'll take the Heads of the Valleys Road, just for a change, instead of going down the M4. I love the name, the Heads of the Valleys. It's where all the Welsh valleys join up, and you're just going along this, you know – so you'll go to the head of for the Rhymney Valley, the Rhondda valley, you know. I did at one time live in Wales, I did live in the Rhymny valley, so I do have memories of that – in fact, I was living in Wales just before I came to Ireland.

Location 5: The Helm pub, Commercial Row

The Holyhead route is another one that I take, and I know we're not talking about that – that would remind me more of my growing up, getting the train and going on holidays when I was a kid. But the other area, the Pembroke Dock area, is more about being a young woman, off on my own and travelling around: it's more about that, I think. There's just one High Street, and I might go – I don't know why the pub, but that's what I seem to remember doing, going for pub grub there. It seemed to me to be, like ... I have a feeling that it probably isn't open, because it was just ... it seemed to be in a place that it shouldn't be in, and it seemed to be the perfect thing for me, at the time, because I was absolutely exhausted. I'd driven this old banger to the port at Rosslare, and then I'd got the ferry, and then I'd got a train because I had business I had to sort out in Cardiff. I had stuff I had to tie up from living there – or in Caerphilly – and then I just turned around and came back. So I was, you know, I was young, and I was very able for it, but I was also absolutely exhausted. And I saw this place, like a complete haven, and it seemed to be a place where people would, you know, where a working man might go and have a pint, you know, and it had, what I remember is this enormous pool table, and I was thinking, that's just the size of a bed, and I could lie on it now, and have a sleep, in another world! But I love the fact that, whenever you're in port like that, you go in for a cup of tea, people hardly ever chivvy you on, or move you on, because they know you're waiting. And it's a kind of thing that they do – they accept the fact that people are going to spend, you know, an hour over a cup of tea, read a book ... I know this is a very mundane thing, but one of the things I always think of is going shopping! Saying to yourself, now I can go into one of the supermarkets and buy stuff, especially alcohol, cheaper, you know? This kind of thing. I do feel it tends to be that kind of ... But I like that – it's a working town, and I like working towns. So I would be kind of about my business – either I'm waiting, or I'm about my business, one of the other, when I go to Pembroke Dock.

Location 6: Inside the ferryport

I do like it inside the ferryport, I like it there and I love – I love the feeling of getting there. I have my flask of coffee with me, I get in line, I'm taken into my line, I know that I'm safe, that I'm gonna get on this ferry now, and I maybe put the radio on low, have my flask of coffee, and I just wait there. And I love the fact – I just think it's bizarre, actually, but also lovely, that we're all our little pods, all sleeping, in rows and rows and rows and rows of people, you know, this intimate thing of sleeping – and yet we're all ... and then the guys, if you're not awake, the people – they're so patient. Because somebody inevitably in that line is still asleep, and the guy just comes up and knocks gently on your windows to wake you up. He doesn't, you know, he or she doesn't kind of – there's no kind of officiousness. It's just, 'yeah, well, another one's gone asleep: we'll wake them up now.' But also, you have a feeling of safety because you are in someone else's hands: once you're in that line, you're in the hands of all these people – and you can always see somebody, even if you get there two hours early because you were worried about something or, you know ... you still see people. And then, even the way you get on to the ferry, which I always find a little bit worrying, I think from having old cars in the past, you know, coming up this ramp, and then you have to get really close to the person ... all that's done in a very calm, very efficient way. But a very kind of personal way as well, it's very hand on, you know – there's no hologram telling us what to do. It's great. By far my favourite mode of travel. And even when you've got the kids with you – and they're always fast to sleep by the time you get to the ferry – and you just all, you

know, you're all ready to go. There's an amazing number of ferries throughout Europe actually – you know, if you've got plenty of time, you can go so many places by ferry, and just enjoy the journey.

Location 7

I can have a bad crossing as well – I mean, it's not as if I'm a perfect traveller! Say, for example, Sail Rail, I don't know if you know this: certainly in the UK, you can go into a station and buy a ticket that will take you as far as Dublin – I'm not sure about Cork – and it's extremely cheap. You can be completely spontaneous then, you can do it the day before, and basically get on the train in Cork, and you'll have a plenty of time to get the ferry, and then you can get the train on the other side. And I love that, because I love seeing myself travelling across space, and feeling myself travelling across space – and I also love meeting people. The first poem I ever got published was called 'The Boat Train'. I was supposed to be on a flight – I was in Manchester with my mother, and the airports were closed because of snow. And just, you know, hearing people's conversations as we're travelling – it's bit like *The Canterbury Tales* or something, you don't know what you're gonna hear on the train, or on a boat! And there are things I've experienced on ferries, and kind of fellow-feeling – you know, my favourite story is one I feel like I can't really share because it's mainly not my story, but, you know, meeting an amazing young woman who was pregnant on one of these ferries, and the conversation and the connections we had. It was amazing. It's just so different because, literally, you can get on a ferry and travel across the sea for forty euros – or even less. And you just get so many different kinds of people on that ferry. I love that – and I love the fact that when the kids go, you know, we've been to ferries with cinemas ... one time, my son, he had his holiday money, fifty euros, and he lost it on the ferry – and blow me, he got it back. Somebody picked it up and handed it in. It was incredible. You know, a plane is just like a tin can we get in and then we get off, it's completely different. But we're also so controlled, you know? It's not that feeling of safety, it's a feeling like you've done something slightly wrong, that you don't get on a ferry! I suppose that's why, back to that thing, 'rock my soul, rock my soul,' at the beginning that I was talking about – that's the feeling I get when I'm on a ferry.

Location 8: The Pump House [on the roundabout on the Western Way]

There is one place, actually, that I should have mentioned, which is another one of those – I can't remember what it is, there's a redbrick building on your way into the town, at the roundabout, and that's also one of those, you know, welcome sights. And you know, usually I'm going around the roundabout when all these big lorries are there, but this beautiful red building is kind of calling to me on one side. It's on its own, and it seems to be of the same period, maybe Victorian, something like that. I'm not sure what it is. I have a feeling – this one reminds me of some place where people go in to – again, some kind of working people go in there to have a cup of tea, and to put their dirty boots, or whatever – it's got that look about it.

Location 9

To me, especially at this time Covid, to put myself in another place – I mean, if I was walking down Pembroke Dock I'd be going, 'oh, that's the place where I did this, oh, that's the place where I did that!' But even so I have quite a lot of memories, you know. I'm travelling in my head as we speak.