

Stephen Devereux

TWO POEMS



Orford Castle (photographed by Kirsten Tambling)

Stephen Devereux grew up near the Suffolk coast, its landscape figuring in much of his work. Most of his adult life has been spent in the North-West and the people and cityscapes of the north also loom large in his poetry. He writes both traditional and contemporary poetry. He has contributed to many magazines, including: *Acumen*, *Agenda*, *Ambit*, *Brittle Star*, *Borderlines*, *Bohemyth*, *The Cannon's Mouth*, *Carillon*, *Chimera*, *Coffee House Poetry*, *The Delinquent*, *Envoi*, *Iota*, *The Interpreter's House*, *Other Poetry*, *Poetry Salzburg*, *Raindog*, *The SHOp*, *Seventh Quarry*, *Smiths Knoll*, *The Stinging Fly*, *Turbulence*, *The White Review*. He has read at events and festivals, including supporting Felix Dennis on his *Did I mention the Free Wine?* tour. He has several poems on the Poetry Library, South Bank archive and has made recordings for them. He has been placed in several competitions including short listed for the Arvon Foundation Northern Short Story Competition, most recently, winner of the Slipstream Poetry Prize and runner-up for the Elmet Foundation's Ted Hughes Prize (judge Liz Lochhead). As well as poetry, Stephen Devereux has also published short stories, essays and travel writing.

As well as the two poems below, Stephen Devereux has written another fantastic poem which inspired by the Suffolk Coast: *Toby's Walks*, about the ghostly drummer boy of Walberswick, which [won the Slipstream poetry competition in 2011](#).

Orford Merman

Whatever it was tangled in their nets,
It was not a fish. It had legs and fur,
like an otter. They kept him in the dungeon.
But when they peeped in his legs had fused,
his hairs had hardened, become scales.

He did not speak. Torture was required.
They began with thumb screws and red hot pincers.
He stared at the glowing metal in amazement.
They gave up on the rack, him having now
only the one scaly leg and fused ankles.

He had no scream in him but only formed
his mouth into an O. Swish, he said to them. Swish.
They tried recreation, netted off a bit of the harbour
and threw him in. As he dived they saw his fused feet
become a great green tail slapping the surface.

Some fishermen said they had glimpsed him,
surfacing a few miles out and crossed themselves,
but all the world's oceans could not contain him.

He called up a storm to founder the king's fleet,
Off Dunwich sang his tiny song to washerwomen
who ran in naked in the surf to him, never to be seen
again, sunk fishing boats whenever he saw one.

The villagers knew he was god. Or a god.
They sneaked his image, peeping through
seaweed into every church,
prayed to him for forgiveness.

Underneath

Ophelia had to be killed off because
She was in with the water nymphs.

We shared with her the primitive
magic of herbs and watery sex.
We took her down with us, kissed her
garlands, gave her a bed of water cress.

And below us the mermaids swim,
deeper than the seas, lighter than air.
Their treachery cannot be contained,
their secret possession of the ocean's
voice, their suave necromancy.

All of us share the knowledge of
transformation. As we break the surface
with our pale girls' faces, women's bodies,
we are writhing serpents below, still.

The men who know that jump in anyway,
learn we are not immortals. At their touch
our corpses rupture and darken, sink
with our lovers to the ocean's floor.

Stephen Devereux writes, of the two poems he contributed to *Poems Underwater*,

Orford Merman

I grew up by the Suffolk coast. It's a spooky, eerie, mysterious place. I've written about it again and again. I'm interested in the legends and folklore associated with that area, such as Toby, the drummer boy ghost and Black Shuck, the gigantic demon dog. I've known about the Orford Merman since childhood and he figures in some of my poems. I recognised the images on your website at once and it got me thinking about him again. The guide at Orford Castle used to tell stories about him when we went there as children and my starting point for the poem was his vivid account of the torture of the Merman and his escape. I found out a bit more about supposed mermen sightings and used them to present the idea of him getting his own back on humanity. In Suffolk folklore, he seems to be mixed up with the Green Man as a godlike figure and appears in many of the churches. That gave me my narrative and imagery. I'm glad that I looked at your website because it provoked me into writing something that had been lurking in the back of my mind for a long while. I'm glad that he's escaped once again.



Military pagodas in the distance at Orford Ness (photographed by Laura Seymour)

Underneath

A related idea that intrigues me is that of underwater kingdoms, dwellings and beings. Maybe the stories told about the lost city of Dunwich are the origin. I think it also comes from Kingsley's *Water Babies* and Dore's illustrations of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The legends of the Sirens are also connected in some way, probably through the idea of beautiful and dangerous female figures. I tend to work from visual stimuli and looked at Millais' painting of *Ophelia*. There is the same connection between a female figure, water and vegetation. This linked her to the water nymphs. It came to me that *Ophelia* was being rejected by humanity and being taken down to this other darker, more mysterious kingdom of women. That was my story and the images that came to me linked these things together. *Ophelia* is mortal and dies for love. I have made my mermaids and water nymphs share these characteristics rather than the darker versions of them found in the myth of *Hylas*.