

*(Award winning memoir, 'Homecoming', placed first, at the 'Write By The Sea Literary Festival,'  
Memoir category, at Kilmore Quay, Co. Wexford, 2019.)*

## **Homecoming**

by Rosemary Tumilty

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*Dedicated to all the fishermen who have lost their lives at sea.*

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I stand today, as a woman, in the place that changed my life; the place I call home.

Tiny dots on the horizon. An ominous, angry evening sky. Waves chewing at the outer pier and harbour walls. The hood of my raincoat, wildly flapping, as a seagull beating against storm clouds seeking shelter; my ears partly exposed and freezing. Others shelter in cars, eyes cast to the horizon. Hope and anxiety palpable in the air. A grey seascape tattooed on my brain, as slowly, imperceptibly, the dots glow brighter, moving from the horizon onto the grey matted blanket that undulates and threatens to envelop them, like Jonah swallowed whole, floating in the belly of a whale, leaving not a trace.

And I remember.

The overwhelming tang of herring, seaweed, and diesel oil claw at the back of my throat. I am wrapped in my dad's oversized jumper, the sleeves rolled up time and again on my childish arms, but there is nowhere on the planet I'd rather be on a damp, windy August evening.

I jump down from the harbour wall, little bare-toed, summer-sandaled feet splash through miniature veins of river tributaries on the rough concrete of the pier, then scurry after Dad's size 12 footsteps. Little fingertips run along the high harbour wall; the early evening harbour lights catch the ripple motion as each of his rainbow footprints fade away.

One by one boats chug past us as we stand, hand in hand, watching as they navigate the tight twists and turns of the inner harbour walls, past the ice-house and green-mossed slipways, leaving the angry sea and its hungry belly behind for another day.

Taking their berths, we stand alongside on the quay among ropes thick as my wrists, as crates of fish are thrown from the deck of the small skiffs up into the strong waiting arms of the crew, glistening arcs of salt and fish scales trailing in their wake. The crew's features are softened now that feet are rooted on concrete. Crates are stacked before being loaded onto trollies, the boats swaying and dipping as voices call instructions from below deck, and shout jovial

obscurities: the catch, boat, and crew all now safe in the harbour's embrace, the day though not yet over for these weary hardworking men.

We shout down to the crew, "Any chance of a few herring?"

They laugh and shout for a bag.

Wafts of diesel, the heaving of grimy yellow and orange oilskin-clad fishermen; boats jockeying and grinding for position against the harbour walls; reels and monstrous ropes heaved ashore; heavy dulcet tones ringing out among barely broken voices; the clatter of plastic crates and the torrential outpouring of ice; machinery and winches whining in the evening air; drizzly rain clinging to jackets, jumper and hair; chains and nets for repair, clanking, grating, catching: a cacophony of vibrant harbour noises, sights and aromas absorbed by a young mind.

Suddenly, from somewhere, a plastic bag materializes, and six or eight weighty beauties are slipped into their travel bag and carried as precious cargo back to the car after much waving, smiling and the offering and refusal of money: the bag dripping and awash with fish oils.

A peek into the bag on the way home and I know at a glance there'll be plenty of roe on the pan this evening, these beauties will deliver. I'll help my mum and granny with the washing, gutting, and cleaning, dipping the fish and roe into flour then listen to the sizzle and skite from the pan on the Aga, as warm smells fill the kitchen and Mum will laugh and shout for someone to open the back pantry door and let the smell out! Teeth will sink through the crispy skin into the soft sweet salty flesh; the roe, squeezed between tongue and roof of the mouth, popping with flavour, and a cut of McCann's loaf, twice the size of my hand, to accompany the offerings, swiping fish skeletons and bones about the oily plate, wiping the plate clean. Happy, smiling, laughing faces round the table.

Yes, a feast awaits indeed.

Kilkeel harbour sang to me as a child on cold wintery nights in London, waiting for the summer to come so that I could go home, for the draw of the sea is too great for a mere human being.

Today though, I see the grey tattoo etched on liquid sunken eyes of those who look to the horizon, waiting. Forever waiting.

In Kilkeel I have come home.

With the sea I am as one.

I am at peace.

**Biography:**

Rosemary Tumilty, formerly a Nurse, and then nursery school manager/proprietor, is a singer/songwriter, poet, playwright, and author from Kilkeel, Co.Down, now living in Newry. She is the beneficiary of two prestigious scholarships: *The W.B. Yeats International Summer School*, 2018, and the *John Hewitt International Summer School*, 2019, and is the recipient of four Arts Council NI Awards for Literature between 2018 and 2022.

She has contributed to eight anthologies, and been commissioned for ‘*Embrace the Place*’ with the Armagh Rhymers in conjunction with Arts Council NI, The Titanic Foundation, and Tourism NI.

Her latest collaborative work is part of the ‘*Our Place In Space*’ – Unboxed – Creativity in the UK project 2022, working on scriptwriting and lyrics with a small group of writers alongside composer, Aine Mallon, and Dumbworld, NI, towards a final presentation piece for 2023 at Cultra and the Transport Museum as well as in The Courthouse creative space in Bangor.

The YouTube link below is of Rosemary reading her Award-winning memoir, ‘*Homecoming*’, which picked up first place in the memoir category at the Wexford International Writing Festival, ‘*Write by the Sea*,’ at Kilmore Quay, 2019, and was subsequently published in *North Star*, 2020. This linked event was with Flash Fiction Armagh, at *The Armagh Food and Cider Festival*, 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6P9cW5hdBE>

