These four poems end this book as they gesture toward still-unnarrated waters. The poems ask what bodies learn from their encounters with Ocean. They are part of a larger project that explores swimming as an aesthetic practice for our age of ecological catastrophe.

The poems respond to this photograph by Vanessa Daws, a Dublin-based visual artist. The image was taken during “Lambay Swim,” a collaborative journey made by the swimmers of Low Rock on 17th June 2014.

Image 1: Vanessa Daws, “Lambay Swim.”
Elbow Above

As if in question an arm bends. Beneath,  
Hidden by flood, a body. The angle marks  
What it shows and conceals. Water ensheathes  
Flesh. Wet, salt, and free-in-air, the arm arcs  
Through two fluids by turns, unmarked.  
What does the swimmer know of the sea?  
Elbow promises a plunge we can’t see,  
The knife of re-entry, when landed flesh  
Splits sea. No splash nor strain but repeated plea  
That human form with ocean surge can mesh.
Six in a Boat

We are too many, sing the mariners, off-key.  
Too many!

Up we go, and down the swell.  
Too many!

In that carved-out space where wood displaces sea.  
Too many!

We float and roll and row and watch and be.  
Too many!

This is no way for land apes to live with flood.  
Too many!

We round our backs above arcs through which we scud.  
Too many!

Like music the oars keep time’s splashing bell.  
Too many!

Tuning salt ears to hear nor heaven nor hell.  
Too many!
Invisible Bodies

Not nothing but everything
Spreads its bulk below. Globe-girdling, world-
Changing, moving, its wet fingers seep into
Any dry place you can name:
My body, these words, your face or hands or just-speaking
Mouth.
I have to believe it!
That the swimmer’s body knows that greater body,
Not as you know a lover or a riddle or a problem in logic
But as things of opposite nature know one another
By imaginary subtraction, cross-formation, hidden
Additions.
Headless

Whatever he sees it’s not through our air.
Light bends underwater.
It turns and diffracts, changes colors, closes distance.
Inside that slate-swell, the more-than-blue, all-shifting—
There is little he can see or think or do.
Might invisibility be his secret?
What is it like to swim headless,
Without thoughts or visions or sounds or smells?
No taste either: just one endless undifferentiated touch,
Swirling around one body within that larger body.
The swimmer knows something of the sea.
But he can’t speak it because while he swims
His face angles down
Beneath the surface.