Rain from the Dublin Bus

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**Topography of Travel Writing**

Every summer my family packed up our little sedan—three suitcases, three backpacks and a cooler in the predawn dark—and drove sixteen hours from Ohio to Iowa. Then came eight days sitting on the beige, sixties-style carpet of my grandmother’s living room, staring at the corn-to-every-horizon through the window, listening to my mother insist she would never leave Ohio, that she would retire right where I had been born. Grandma Marie would nod sleepily, her head popping up to exclaim, “I jus’ wish you kids weren’t gone half s’much,” before tucking her chin once more.

Even as a child I knew these were not “vacations,” at least, not the way my schoolmates used the word—excursions to the Rocky Mountains or San Francisco, to Virginia Beach, New York City or Disney World. When I asked Mom why we did not take family vacations, she only glanced at me and said that of course we did, remember all those drives to Grandma’s? My mother has always defined her life in terms of heavy, sturdy metaphors—a tree with deep roots, a brick house with a poured-cement foundation. To her my childhood love of mustangs and knight-goes-forth-to-defeat-the-dragon stories were nothing more than products of the books I read. They did not hint that her eldest daughter was a different creature, one who would use motion and travel as a way to stay in touch with her identity, to flex her muscles of independence, to escape her troubles, to learn about the strange world beyond the middling horizon of Appalachian foothills.
At eight years old I did not know how to articulate the difference between the Petrick’s vacations to Block Island and our trips to Iowa. I did not know how to explain to her exactly what I wanted or exactly why I wanted it. I assumed I had merely been cursed with an extended family that lived in boring places. When school reconvened in the fall, I was condemned to the outer circle of jumpers and pigtails, stuck without a glamorous story of skyscrapers or sandcastles to catapult me towards the center.

Released into college with an itch to move and a proclivity for writing, I started gathering my ropes, beams and springs: travelling to Israel, Spain and Ireland during the summers while taking creative writing classes during the school year. I had not thought about this project as a catapult away from my mother’s sturdy tree metaphors and towards a life of migration, towards the center of a listening audience, but in some ways that is absolutely what it is. These six essays and the travels that brought them about are explorations of the itinerant and always-in-motion life that I did not experience as a child—a physical essai at the quest, exile and pilgrimage narratives that I loved but never lived. This introduction then serves to place my migration-and-story impulse against a backdrop of others. I will chart the landscape of travel writing—the gendered and colonial elements that form its driest deserts, the contested border it shares with journalism and memoir—and I will mark how my own endeavors align with that landscape.
What is travel writing?

Most people think of this genre as narrative nonfiction in which the writer is not at home—often in a foreign country. This of course has been challenged by critically acclaimed essays like Colby Buzzell’s “Down and out in Fresno and San Francisco,” in which Buzzell details several days in the Tenderloin, an impoverished neighborhood of San Francisco where he has lived for several years, in the city where his family has lived for decades. Writing about “home” does not necessarily deny the label of “travel writing,” and this calls for a more precise definition. In his book *Travel Writing: The Self and the World*, Casey Blanton posits a two-part structure as the genre’s defining feature: “travel books are vehicles whose main purpose is to introduce us to the other” and they “dramatize an engagement between self and world” (Blanton xi). Put another way, the goal of the travel writer is to introduce the reader to something outside themselves or outside their own experience, and the bulk of the narrative comes from the writer’s reactions to and interactions with this external something. So when Buzzell leaves his San Francisco apartment and runs into an elderly homeless man who once saw Miles Davis play at a local bar, Buzzell knows this intersection of poverty, history and personality lies outside the experience of many of his readers, outside the scope of his young, formerly middle-class experience until this moment. He is only a few blocks from his home, but he is still a traveller in a surprising, strange world.

In this way Blanton’s structure-based rather than subject-based definition sidesteps pesky issues of geography and mileage: how far do we have to get from our
front door before we are travelling? Instead, Blanton’s border highlights how travel narratives comprise a surface narrative of the “world,” as well as the internal narrative of how the narrator reacts to and reflects on the surface narrative. When Buzzell hears the old man talk about hearing Miles Davis at a local club, he becomes “sad that the Black Hawk is no longer there,” and goes home to listen to a recording of the performance with a bottle of cheap wine: “This is about as close as I think anybody is going to get to reliving the experience of seeing Miles at the Black Hawk” (Buzzell 34). His interaction with the “other” (as Blanton calls it) catalyzes a feeling of loss and nostalgia. That feeling resonates backwards through the essay to an earlier scene in which an experience smoking crack cocaine for the first time—another encounter with a different “other”—brings to the author’s mind another loss: “I think of my beloved mother, who recently passed away, and then how she would roar back from the dead and violently kick my ass if she knew what I was about to do” (Buzzell 29). The hollowness of permanent loss breathes out of these scenes, and yet the essay is not about loss. If this essay had not been travel writing, its raison d’être might have been exploring loss or grief, and its scenes might have included those of his mother’s deathbed, of finding old pictures of the Black Hawk, of talking to his sister about their mother, of talking to his friends about old jazz. The author would have scratched at the grief, attacked it from several different angles. As it is Buzzell paints a portrait of daily life in the Tenderloin—its people, lifestyles, sights, sounds, smells—and those “others” that he encounters on the street provoke feelings of respect, nostalgia, anger, confusion, fear and grief—feelings that give the piece its significance and emotional
power. The place and its contents take precedent, and the essay occurs as a reaction to and interaction with it.

At its heart then, travel writing is a physical narrative—“I arrived in Dublin with Bethany, and we walked through the city to my house”—that the author weaves with the internal narrative she was experiencing at the time—“I was afraid Bethany did not understand why I loved Dublin, so I continued trying to understand her reaction and connect with her.” This means that much travel writing takes on an event-reaction-action structure in which the place impacts the writer in a way that informs how the writer interacts with the place. Setting and author continue to interact and negotiate each other within the margins of the essay.

There is no single way to portray that negotiation, and some travel writing strays closer to memoir, journalism or other forms of nonfiction. Another way of seeing this is by asking which side of the place-self pairing a particular piece of travel writing tends to privilege. Writing that spends more time with the external narrative often falls closer to journalism, while essays that spend more time with the internal narrative fall closer to memoir. As the essays in this collection attest, sometimes exploring a reaction to a place means staying only in that moment—as in “What They’ve Made Us” and “I’ll Sing it One Last Time For You.” Some reactions to places and events require the writer to explain the emotional baggage brought to the moment by memories from the recent past—as in “Howth” or “Rain from the Dublin Bus”—or memories from the distant past—as in “Reversible World” and “Life of Fire.” At one extreme of this spectrum, the first type is the most common, the best suited for
magazines like *Outside, GQ, National Geographic Adventure,* and *The New Yorker* which comprise the biggest forum for travel writing. Thus examples of this structure are many: “Storming the Beach” by Rolf Potts, “The New Mecca” by George Saunders, “Travels in Siberia” by Ian Frazier and numerous others. These stories tend to be plot-focused with straight chronology, moving from one moment straight through to another.

At the opposite magnetic pole, the last type of travel essay tends to take a nested doll structure—starting with the encounter that caused the reaction, and then travelling deeper back into time and the writer’s psychology in order to understand the reaction. Some well-known examples of this would be “A Shared Plate” by Chitrita Banerji or “Upon this Rock” by John Jeremiah Sullivan. Banerji’s essay begins at an Indian wedding, moves to a section about her parents’ intensely unhappy marriage, then returns to the wedding scene to close the essay. Sullivan’s piece follows a similar structure—he goes to a Christian Rock festival and meets a group of youths, flashes back to his own intense experience with conservative Christianity, then flashes forward to the festival again. As these two examples suggest, travel essays written in this way tend to revolve around intense emotions and intense memories, which comes as no surprise as the catalyst for the essay is a present-moment reaction so strong that it reaches all the way back through distant memories to find its explanation.

Between these two are essays that pull from the recent past to explain a reaction to the present. The reaction triggering such an essay is not so strong as to send the writer back to a specific, high-emotion moment, but it is also not simple
enough that it can be completely explored in the confines of the present-tense text. To accommodate this essays of this variety often take a braided form that splices several digressions into the main narrative. Because these digressions can be bits of other narrative or more nebulous musings, these middle-ground essays tend towards a more meditative feel, a slow exploration of the reaction to a place. In her essay “Airborne,” a moment looking out the airplane window causes Sally Shivnan to meander through many thoughts on geography and perspective. While sitting naked in a hot tub, the sight of her own body causes Heidi Julavits to consider the culture of nude spas in her essay “Naked Ambition.”

I had intended most of my essays to occupy this middle space. I was never drawn to the plot-centered, journalistic stories of the first type. However, I also did not want to recast Ireland as nothing but a reflection of my own psychological landscape, a place that had no significance except for the memories it recalled for me. Especially when a foreign country is involved, this route through travel writing can seem colonial or ethnocentric to me, stripping the other culture and landscape of its own meaning and power, reducing it to nothing but a series of symbols that I—the seeing, naming, empowered subject—must interpret. I wanted to keep well away from both extremes. In the end, I realized I did not make that decision. The reality of writing creative nonfiction demanded that I write the reactions that I felt, that I write the moments that happened. In line with statistical odds perhaps, this collection comprises two of each variety completely by accident.
Where Genre Intersects Gender

If this internal-external spectrum is one axis used for orienting travel writing, then another is its focus on plot versus setting. Travel by definition implies both location and motion: “1. make a journey, typically of some length or abroad, 1.1 journey along (a road) or through (a region)” (‘Travel’ OED). If one looks up “journey” (which the first definition is so dependent on), the first definition is: “an act of traveling from one place to another” (‘Journey’ OEd). All three definitions are centered on movement and place.

One would expect a similarly dual focus in travel narratives, a focus on place and on movement through it. In literary terms this could be framed as a focus on plot and a focus on setting. While it would seem obvious for travel writing to include both elements in large supply, some travel writing mostly or completely sacrifices one in the service of another. In the introduction to his collection *Marco Polo Didn’t Go There*, Rolf Potts defines his own work as “postmodern” by saying, “I use the word to describe the increasing placelessness that accompanies any information-age journey” (Potts xvi). He explains that in a world strapped with the homogenizing force of mass media, mass tourism, and trans-national companies, place loses its meaning as one geographic location loses its uniqueness and becomes more like another. In some ways, setting does not exist for Potts: “Many recurring themes of the travel tales in this book . . . are the result of dislocation” (Potts XVI). As such, Potts’s essays detail him hitchhiking across Europe or trying to sneak onto a movie set. They detail the
various actions he took along the way and the people he encountered as a result. These elements make up the “world” that he is encountering, the outside element that he engages to form Blanton’s dual structure of travel writing. He replaces setting with character and circumstance. Though the hitchhiking essay takes place in Poland and the Ukraine, he never describes the way these places look, smell, sound or feel. He never gives us snapshots of the countryside or cities. Similarly, his movie-set essay spends no page-space discussing Thailand. His essays are all about motion and very little about place.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, writers like Richard Rodriguez are almost all setting and no plot. His essays are swan dives into the atmosphere, texture and tone of a place, rendered poetically with all the sensory detail so stressed by writing professors. He gives us sights, “An old woman proffers sno-cones that look like bulbs of blood” (80). He gives us sound: “children pass among the cars and among the honking horns” (Rodriguez 16). He gives us sensations—“We have a headache”—and scents—“Nor is the city air any relief, but it is brown, fungal, farted” (Rodriguez 13). Whether in Mexico City, Tijuana, San Diego or Los Angeles, Rodriguez wants his readers to enter this place through the page. The physical realities of city and countryside are vitally important to his writing.

At this farthest end of the spectrum, essays often stop being sorted into the “travel writing” bin. Essays that privilege setting over plot are often categorized as “place writing” or, if the piece takes an ecological over cultural bent, “nature writing.” Though they do not include the motion aspect in great supply, many of these essays fit
Casey Blanton’s definition of the dual structure, the dialectic between the “self” and the “world.” The ones that do not contain such as structure interact with the place through the filter of childhood memory and descriptions of “how things were,” as opposed to the reactive, immediate structure of travel writing. Rodriguez’s essays often fit Blanton’s structure perfectly: such as the essay “India” in which the author takes a bus tour of Mexico City and meditates on the intersections between Mexican history and his own identity. This piece and others qualify as travel writing by any definition one wishes to use—narratives that take place abroad, narratives involving motion and location, narratives dramatizing a “self” engaging with the “world.”

Even though critics do not often classify Rodriguez under the umbrella of place writing or travel writing, I would place him at the crossroads of the two, and I use him to exemplify that intersection for one specific reason: he is male. Though strides towards equality have been made in the last twenty years, especially by writers like Joan Didion and Susan Orlean, travel writing remains primarily a domain for male writers, while women are more easily accepted in the realm of place and nature writing. As a point of reference, an anthology of nature and place writing called *Wildbranch*, published in 2010, contains the work of twenty-nine women and twenty-one men, while the edition of *Best American Travel Writing* published in the same year contains nineteen men and one woman.

The theories on women’s exclusion from travel writing are many and varied. In her article “Travelling Lite,” Rachel Friedman summarizes some of the reasons that this genre remains a man’s world patched with outbreak female artists. One problem is
the opinion that women’s travel experiences are less full or meaningful than those of their male counterparts. Even some successful female travel writers like Mary Morris believe that “women are more circumscribed than men in their travels,” because “there’s an extra dimension of caution that you’re always aware of” (Friedman 56). Women’s experiences are limited by their position as potential victims of assault and by the belief (whether real or projected) that their decisions are always impacted by thoughts of safety and personal comfort. More detrimental than writers or potential readers thinking this, editors of the magazines that provide the major platform for travel writing seem to think so as well. As a freelance editor for the Toronto Star and New York magazine, Jessica Colley told Friedman, “editors believe men will take on any assignment, no matter how adventurous or quirky, whereas it is sometimes assumed women wouldn’t be interested in writing about topics that, for example, are physically demanding” (Friedman 58).

While these are all real impediments to women’s travel writing gaining momentum and reaching broader markets, many critics see these elements as symptomatic rather than causal. From 2000 to 2013, Best American Travel Writing comprised on average four essays by women to twenty essays by men, working out to 19% women’s work and 81% men’s work. In Best American Essays, the numbers are slightly better with an average of eight stories by women to sixteen stories by men, with percentages of 33% and 67% respectively. Interestingly, fiction is the arena that has achieved equality, with Best American Short Stories containing an average of ten and ten for women and men, and percentages of 59% and 61% with slight favoring of
men. When I first made my spreadsheets and looked at these numbers, I was confused. If the lack of women in travel writing stemmed from the belief that women’s travel was stunted by fear, or that male editors did not give women as many physically demanding assignments, why did the gender ratios in nonfiction not mirror the equality that they did in fiction? What was it that kept women’s travel writing and general nonfiction from being written, read, or critically acclaimed? Why did fiction alone have the claim to gender neutrality?

I was sitting at a university orchestra concert listening to Vivaldi’s Four Seasons when all pieces suddenly combined, my mind streaming and sizzling like a pot that suddenly boils over. Fiction allows female writers a freedom that nonfiction denies them by definition—in short stories women can write stories with male protagonists. Cheryl Strayed, a recently best-selling travel writer and guest editor of Best American Essays, once said in an interview, “Men’s stories are seen as universal, women’s as particular” (qtd in Friedman 57). When I had originally read the quote, I had understood “men’s stories” and “women’s stories” as narratives written by the respective genders, but as I listened to the pastoral dance in cello and violin, I began to think of it as stories about women and men. In the annually selected fiction in the Best American series, about half of the female writers consistently wrote from the perspective of male protagonists, while significantly fewer men wrote female leads. Perhaps I should have expected this in a world where movies like The Lion King and Finding Nemo are “kids’” movies but Beauty and the Beast and Brave are “girls’” movies. Still, it shocked me that such a gendered outlook could slip so silently into
the literary world: that men want stories about men, while women will take stories about either gender. It shocked me that such a simple cultural truth could operate as such a potently marginalizing force against women’s writing. When Strayed was publishing her best seller *Wild*, she had to fight to have the book marketed to a male and female audience: “My real theory is that men would enjoy most stories from women [if the marketing encouraged it]. There is nothing in particular about *Wild* but how it was positioned. The cover was really important. I wanted men to be able to read it on the subway” (qtd in Friedman 57). Instead of the pastel, chic-lit cover originally proposed by her publisher, Strayed pushed for something gender neutral. The current cover—a solid white background with a battered hiking boot—seems to prove the victory of both her fight and theory.

If the root problem is that male stories are universal and female stories particular, then a double problem for travel writing lies in just what form those “universal” male stories take. Many literary critics that deal in travel writing feel the need, in the introductions of their books, to unpack the great epics both of the ancient world and the more recent centuries. *The Odyssey, The Epic of Gilgamesh,* and *Moby Dick* are all common picks for this exploration for travel writing’s roots. Indeed the critics agree that such stories occupy an undeniable place at the deepest heart of the Western canon and at the heart of Western cultural and psychological reality. As Casey Blanton puts it:

> These works resonate with a symbolic and psychological truth that goes beyond their compelling narrative surfaces . . . The shift works on an intuitive level because of what Joseph Campbell calls the existence of the ‘monomyth,’ where the hero is seen as one who travels along a path of self-improvement
and integration, doing battle with the ‘others’ who are unresolved parts of himself or herself. (Blanton 2-3)

While Blanton very appropriately uses both gendered pronouns, the fact remains that the central examples do not include stories of both genders (what is more, it is just this sort of landscape-as-subconscious element that caused me to be wary of travel writing from the beginning). Quest stories traditionally belong to a male world and have accrued powerful meanings within that world: journey as the “medium of traditional male immortality,” as the projecting of “models of good and heroic behavior . . . that affirm as good the distribution of authority and power,” and that “make a man a man” (Smith iv-xi). Through travel the man asserts his agency, makes that agency visible, makes it memorable enough to be recounted, makes it powerful enough to reinforce the ideology that empowered him. In these epics, women do not have that power. The deepest problem that stunts growth in women’s travel writing is a culture that cannot shake its vision of men as the quest-takers while seeing women as homemakers. Smith gives a botanical term to this vision of one-location women—sessility—“To be ‘sessile’ in botanical terms is to be permanently planted, tenaciously fixed, utterly immobile. It is, in a sense, to remain always ‘at home,’ which has been the traditional locale assigned to women” (Smith x). Not only was I entering a genre in which my stories might automatically be categorized as “particular,” but I was also entering a smaller, more specific fight in which the narrative mode I was undertaking was considered quintessentially male.

Thus one explanation for why an anthology of place writing like *Wildbranch* and an anthology of general nonfiction like *Best American Essays* would contain a
higher ratio of female writers is that in place and nature writing women do not have to
fight this cultural current demanding sessility. Travel—and writing about travel—
becomes an important arena in which women can stake their agency and independence.

With this in my mind, I was unsure of how to use that arena to its fullest extent,
and uncertain as to whether that was my responsibility and mission. Unlike Cheryl
Strayed, Mark Jenkins or Rolf Potts, my journeys do not draw zigzagging paths across
the interior space of a map. When I travel, I usually chose a home base—a city where
I will live, work and study—and then my journeys become spokes coming out from
that hub. I journey out of and back to my base camp, drawing a wheel on the
country’s map. While this mode of travel was somewhat governed by the programs
under which I have travelled—internships and study abroad—the point is that I chose
to travel this way rather than as an explorer crossing a continent. Especially for my
trip to Ireland, I deliberately chose not to follow the typical study abroad experience
and explored many options—hiking the Sultan’s Trail through the Balkans,
backpacking across central Europe. I eventually chose the internship in Ireland,
because I wanted to fully immerse myself in a place. I wanted to live, work, sleep, eat,
buy groceries, go to the movies and go for walks all in the same town or city. I told
myself that by spending more time in Dublin I was looking for a deeper experience of
the city. I was doing more than passing through. What I did not realize when I signed
the lease for my Dublin apartment was that I was defining the depth of the relationship
with this city by the depth of the roots I would put down there. I was reenacting my
mother’s home making. I was building a new foundation of brick. In some ways this
travel style embodies Smith’s feminine sessility: I did not travel but merely transplanted myself, merely set down new roots. At the same time, I cannot bring myself to believe that this strategy was negative because of its gender patterns. My relationship with Dublin was stronger for my extended stay. My feelings for and reactions to the city were deeper and richer; it was impossible for me to see Dublin only as a conquer-able reflection of my untamed subconscious.

This logic is visible not only in my itinerary but in my writing. “Rain from the Dublin Bus” and “Howth” dramatize this dynamic most obviously as they meditate on what it means to leave and return to the Irish capital. They both explicitly call Dublin my “second home” and wonder what it means to have a second home, how that relationship with a place is fluid and tenuous. These two, and other essays like “I’ll Sing It One Last Time For You” and “What They’ve Made Us,” reflect on the longing I sometimes feel for Dublin and the familiarity I enjoy when I am there. In every way imaginable, I talk about the city as “home,” and this focus implies the rootedness, the tendency towards “sessility,” that I feel a simultaneous need to elevate and rebel against. Even the essays that do not make a direct wave towards my relationship towards Dublin—“Life of Fire” and “Reversible World”—dramatize me leaving and returning to the city so that, in the end, the collection very much contains the spoke-and-wheel structure. Though plenty of male travel writers write from a “home” or “second home” (I am glancing up the page to Colby Buzzell), it is impossible not to wonder whether my use of this structure will make my collection into “women’s writing:” penned by, for and about females.
My essays include other stereotypically “sessile” elements as well. In the 2012 edition of *The Best Women’s Travel Writing* (an anthology that has sprung up as a counterweight to marginalization in other forums, but that pesky possessive ‘women’s’ contains the dangerous ambiguity: is this collection by women, or for women? Or both? Does one necessitate the other?), Lavinia Spalding centers her introduction on the idea of family: “As I reviewed the stories that make up this year’s collection, an unexpected theme began rising from the ink: among the cast of characters were two grandfathers, a grandmother, two mothers, a father, a brother, a couple of daughters, a son, some ancestors, a friend’s parents, and two sisters-in-law” (Spalding xvi). Spalding goes on to argue that this “cast” brings an incredible richness and depth-of-emotion to the stories that would otherwise be lacking, and I have to agree. I certainly draw more depth from in my essays from my relationship with my sister than from the one with my coworker Gwen whom I had only known two months. However, Sara is just one of many recurring characters that, apart from my romantic relationships with Darragh and with Ian, are all women: Sara, Bethany, Maggie, and Gwen. Besides my two partners, men make cameo appearances and then vanish. Female friends and family members occur and recur. While writing I did not think about this as a noticeable element of my work, certainly not as a weakness. When I think of travel writing written by men, the pieces that pull in long-standing and familial relationships often contain more emotional punch, simply by raising the stakes. Then again, almost every writer in *The Best Women’s Travel Writing* pulls in a relative. This is not true of *Best American Travel Writing.*
Of course elements of family or romance are not themselves feminine. In Peter Matthiessen’s famous travel book *Snow Leopard*, the bulk of his “internal” narrative comprises his struggles with the recent death of his wife, which checks both the familial and romantic boxes. However, Friedman notes that “while both women and men tell personal stories in their travel writing, women do seem to be judged more harshly for it” (Friedman 57). Elizabeth Eaves, author of *Wonderlust: A Love Affair with Five Continents* agrees: “whereas no one complains when Peter Matthiessen (in *Snow Leopard*) or Paul Theroux (all over the place) writes about their loves and emotions and sex drives,” when women explore this territory, people consider it “overly self-indulgent” (Friedman 57). When Rolf Potts meets a charming Czech girl and wanders through the city being smitten with her, readers find it sincere and charming. When I discuss my brief romance with a blue-eyed Irishman, there is the potential that the narrative will be used to flag my work as distinctly feminine or sentimental.

This leaves me puzzled. Is it my responsibility to write against these feminine writing stereotypes? Do I push the envelope better by writing in line with them and arguing that men should be more interested in these “feminine” concerns? Or would I break the boundaries better by showing that not all women write about home and family? I think the answer is both and neither. I have the responsibility to write what I want to write, to not feel pressured to always write about family, romance or home, and to not let a familial focus consign me to a pink dust jacket.
Style and Language

Perhaps there is a place where these two concerns intersect. Between the belief that women will not take dangerous or uncomfortable assignments and the belief that men have adventures and women have relationships, there is the reality that situations that are both dangerous and exotic are more difficult to find in the twenty-first century. One of the challenges the external-internal structure has faced in the age of tourism, mass media, and globalization is a weakened “world” narrative. As wildernesses dwindle and polyesters proliferate, it is harder and harder to accidentally find oneself in a canoe with a crocodile like Mary Kingsley, or haunted by bush shamans like Graham Greene. Today’s travel writers “struggle to find unexplored territory and new ways to travel,” adventures that will support the tangible half of their narrative (Blanton 9). Many do this by seeking “challenging means and methods of moving through familiar terrain . . . (undertaking) perilous journeys or (choosing) more circuitous routes or unusual modes of transportation” (Blanton 9). They have to be more deliberate (some would say artificial) in their pursuit of adventure.

Within my essays I took a different route. Writing that relies heavily on adrenaline or strangeness tends to privilege the “world” narrative and minimize the “self” narrative, when usually the most interesting moments in the story come from the traffic between the two. The near collision between a shipping vessel and Paul Bennett’s sailboat is less interesting to me than the way the incident triggers Bennett’s reflection about his decision to sail around the world. The narratives I write and read
tend to balance the two halves more equally, if anything privileging the “self” half over the “world” half. My essays follow a path more like Sally Shivnan’s, who braids the view out her airplane window with a meditation on geography, space and perception; or like Richard Rodriguez who twines his journey to Mexico City with a reflection on his heritage and his relationship with his father. Without adrenaline to grip the reader, my pieces will follow Sylvia Plath’s advice: “Everything in life is writeable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise” (Plath 545). I will try to improvise, relying heavily on tone, style, voice, and form to carry my narratives.

The travel writers I have chosen to model share this alternative route to revitalizing the genre, relying less on plot than on stylistic elements. When positioned on the axes laid out above, they tend to privilege the internal half of the story over the external, and they tend to privilege the “place” or setting element over the “movement” or plot element. This creates a more meditative, descriptive essay while still maintaining the immediacy and present-tense feel of travel writing. They seek newness in travel writing not through persistent search of new or unconventional journeys, but by turning back to other genres—memoirs, essays, novels, short stories—that have also had to revise themselves, and have done so as much through style and structure as through plot. How many essayists write about their parents? Their siblings? How many journey novels are there? How many short stories about love and death? Instead of searching for new forms of excitement to propel their journey tales, writers such as Richard Rodriguez, Sally Shivnan, Colby Buzzell,
Salman Rushdie, Yiyun Li and others have turned to improvising with form, structure, language and genre lines. What these writing strategies do for travel writing is re-open the distance between the reader and the landscape already familiarized by mass media, multinational corporations and democratized travel. Whereas before a travel writer only had to bring these strange things to the reader’s hands, the new goal is to make the reader realize that watching the CNN coverage of the Arab Spring does not equal going to the Middle East, that watching the Belgian countryside slide past en route to Paris is not the same as walking through the fields, that reading a travel book about Ireland does not equal having a pint with a fifty-year-old, Bono-loving Irishman. Travel writing has become a more complicated genre that must make the world strange again before it can enchant the reader with the difference.

Many of these writers achieve this through a sort of collage effect, in which they combine many types of information, different languages, and different writing forms with their own vibrant language to create a surprising portrayal of place. In his essay “India,” Richard Rodriguez recounts his journey to Mexico and includes “normal” narrative elements—descriptions of setting and characters, narration of actions and events—alongside historical, religious, political, and scientific information—legends about Hernan Cortez, about pre-Columbus Mexico, statistics about religion in Mexico, statistics about the Mexican economy. He hits the reader with so many new facts and insights that no matter how many preconceived notions the reader has about Mexico, the place is immediately defamiliarized. Similarly, by including unusual imagery, he makes Mexico and its landscape surprising and strange:
“Time dropped through the chute . . . with a cover story on Mexico entitled ‘The Population Curse.’ From the vantage point of Sixth Avenue, the editors of *Time-Life* peer down into the basin of Mexico City—like peering down into the skull of a pumpkin” (Rodriguez 20-21). The language pulls the reader from places supposedly familiarized by media—New York and Mexico City—then makes the latter foreign by highlighting the distance between the two, and comparing the Mexican valley to the “skull of a pumpkin.” Instead of reinvigorating his “world” narrative by visiting a seldom-traveled corner of Siberia or canoeing down the Amazon, he manages to make the world seem alien, horrifying and wonderful through his language and use of many types of information.

Because Ireland is place that is so often romanticized by Americans due in part to the nostalgia of the immigrant diaspora, the ability to estrange readers from their ideas about Ireland was particularly important to me. In “Rain from the Dublin Bus” I included an unpacking of Irish travel media, explicitly questioning the preconceptions people keep before the plane touches down. In other essays I included scientific information the way Rushdie does, researching ocean sea floors and weather patterns to include in “Reversible World.” This scientific entry point acts as a counterpoint to the theme of faith in the essay, juxtaposing with the perspective and timbre of the Bible and poetry quotes sprinkled throughout the essay. I do the same with Biblical quotes, literature quotes and historical information in “Life of Fire.” These included bits of meditations on travel advertisements, sea floor charts, Bible passages and
historical background will surprise some readers, I hope, and chip away at the 
preconceived images they bring to a book about America’s favorite island. 

Two other ways that writers have achieved this estrangement is by including 
bits of the place’s native language and by splicing one’s own writing with the work of 
other writers—often poetry—to add another layer to the narrative. In his award-
winning book The Jaguar Smile, Salman Rushdie travels to Nicaragua. Though his 
book takes a fairly journalistic approach—focusing much less on Rushdie and his 
history as Nicaragua and hers—all the thoughts and opinions forwarded through the 
book are explicitly mediated by the author, his political leanings, and his experiences 
of India and Pakistan. To help bring Nicaragua to life as the locus for these thoughts, 
he often splices in poetry by the country’s writers—Gioconda Belli, Daniel Ortega, 
Ernesto Cardenal and others. The words of the poets not only illuminate Nicaraguan 
perspectives with regard to culture, religion, history and politics, but they also add 
tone and texture to the piece, coming at the country from a new angle that the reader 
has probably never experienced (as none of these poets are particularly renowned 
outside of Latin America). In “Reversible World” and “Life of Fire,” I incorporated 
fragments of poetry, often by Irish writers such as Seamus Heaney and James Joyce. 

Like Rodriguez, Rushdie also includes other languages in his travel works, not 
only his native Hindi, but also Nicaragua’s native Spanish. Sometimes these linguistic 
switches occur because the author actually experienced them in the other language, as 
when he gives the reader some examples of the graffiti writing around Managua: 
“Sandino vive,” “Cristo vive, viene pronto,” “Somoza vive” (Rushdie 7). Sometimes
he switches into these languages in order to immerse the reader in how the “others,” the new society, talk about the subject at hand. For example, when talking about Nicaragua’s poor population, Rushdie switches into Hindi and Spanish to make comparisons across continental divisions: “And the roadside shanties put up by the campesinos (peasants) who had come to Managua with hope and not much else, echoed the bustees of Calcutta and Bombay” (Rushdie 8). By using the words that those within Calcutta or Managua might use for these poor, the author estranges us from our own conceptions of being poor and what that means, asking us to think instead about how others might conceive those things.

I tried to do this by including Gaelic as often as I could and by trying to capture the Irish dialect in other places. I think my most telling use of this comes in “Reversible World” when the Irishman I met on the ferry cried, “T’is is t’e Irish Sea, Muir Éireann!” he said, extending his arm over the rail. “T’e British took everyt’in’ else, but t’ey left us t’e sea. Jus’ t’ea sea, t’ey left us. An’ she’s a rough’un she is.” I knew as soon as he switched into Gaelic that I would use the quote somewhere. His implication that the Gaelic word for the Irish Sea conveyed its character more than the English, that the Gaelic portrayed both Irish ownership and Irish fierceness, opened a new door for me in how he conceived of the world around him. In his own language, a phrase with the same denotation as “Irish Sea” possessed such different connotations that he felt the need to use the Gaelic phrase in his explanation of Irish weather patterns. As such, I take the Gaelic phrase and incorporate it later on in the essay as well, trying to remind the reader of the extended possibilities opened by the other
name for the same body of water. I think this moment is not unlike the ones that Rushdie creates in *The Jaguar Smile*: using alternate languages as a way to remind the reader that they do not already know this place, that it is strange and they must pay attention to discover any truth about it.

**Out of Ohio**

Sitting at my Athens desk from August to April with these essays, several months and several thousand miles removed from the actual events, has forced me into a much longer revision cycle than most of my other work has taken. As I continued through this project, the process of revision solidified itself into roughly three stages: writing until I discovered the emotional center of the essay, writing until I found the form to best express that center, and writing until the reader could clearly sense that gravitational center pulling through the page.

Usually it takes me at least two drafts to figure out what the experience I am writing is really about. I have to put a substantial number of words on the page, twice, before I understand why I was drawn to this story in particular and what the emotional or thematic unity of the piece is. I have found that there is no way to speed this process. The only answer is to spend time with the material: brainstorm, write some paragraphs, write some poetry, brainstorm some more, read a little, write some more.

Oddly for me, the final realization of an essay’s center usually happens at the same moment when I find its form. One would think that finding the form to fit the
subject would only be possible once the subject is discovered, but as proof that the
telling has its own power to define the experience, the opposite is often true. The
moment I find the segmented, braided, or nested form of the essay, I find its heart.
Writer Brenda Miller theorizes that this is because form allows writers to be more
honest and vulnerable, because a strong form provides a shield of artifice that allows
them to talk about intensely private matters: “We need to shift our allegiance from
experience itself, to the artifact we’re making of that experience on the page . . .
Honesty, authenticity, bravery: all these qualities emerge under the cover of form,
voice, metaphor, syntax” (Miller 85). By focusing on the form, or on the language at a
more microscopic level, the heart of the essay is allowed to surface.

For me, these forms often took the shape of sharply segmented essays. By
leaving large amounts of white space and restricting myself to small chunks of prose, I
kept myself from slogging blindly through plot. The result was that I only wrote the
important, emotionally charged moments. This is particularly true of Life of Fire and
Reversible World, two essays that are highly emotionally charged, that each took a
strong form as a screen allowing me to reveal the heart of the matter.

The final phase of revision involves clarifying that center and making sure it is
accessible to the reader. Often this takes on a less-is-more route: trimming an essay
will de-clutter it and leave only the heart shining through the white space. Even when
making additions, the necessary added element is often not a whole paragraph or a
whole scene, but a phrase or sentence inserted at a key moment to illuminate its
significance. It could be as simple as adding one adjective that gives one image a
positive rather than negative importance. This phase involves the least actual change to the essay but can often be the most difficult for me, because it involves stepping outside myself and trying to imagine what might not be clear to others, even though it is painfully obvious to my omniscient-in-this-matter mind.

The output of this long revision process has been six essays I have built as part of this catapult-collection, essays that fall somewhat scattered across the travel writing landscape. Along the external-internal axis, they are equally distributed, some privileging the external world and the present moment, while others privilege the internal experience by delving into the past. Plotted the other way, they fall fairly close together on this envisioned topography, all clustered around setting rather than plot. This collection never ignores the ambience, texture or timbre of Ireland, always wanting to bring the reader into this place—rather than merely this set of circumstances and actions—through the words on the page. Though this could be seen as the feminine route of sensibility, of focusing on a place rather than action, it is also the route taken by some experimental travel writers to breathe new life into the genre. The descriptions of place are critical to the process of estranging readers from their media-fed preconceptions. Descriptions are the sites where different strains of information—scientific, historical, and political—can rub shoulders with the emotional or personal concerns of the essay, opening up a new space for the reader. Descriptions are the sites where poetry, quotations, and language switches can startle the reader out of their tell-me-what-I-already-know stupor.
This attitude is visible throughout the following essays: the belief that the exact words make the story as much as the events that inspired them. I am sure that this attitude comes, in part, from my roots as a fiction writer and poet: genres in which the words exist without real events to anchor them down. It also comes from the little girl who used to decide what words meant or what places were like based on the way they sounded—“Annie, ‘ruefully’ doesn’t mean angrily” “But it sounds angry, Mom”—syllables without definitions to tie them down. With all this cerebral floating, travel writing’s requirement of an external focus forces me to balance my imaginative drifting with concentration on physical life. It demands that I stop staring into the middle distance and look out the window, to see the woman unfurling her red umbrella and the rain just starting to darken the Dublin streets.
Rain from the Dublin Bus

Cloudburst and steady downpour now
for days.
   Still mammal,
straw-footed on the mud,
he begins to sense the weather
by his skin.

- Seamus Heaney

The slate-bellied clouds that had rolled high over the Welsh coast, after
seventy miles of open ocean, settled low and pale over Dublin, wrapping the city in a
heavy, damp grip. I shivered as I left the dry warmth of the ferry for the long,
carpeted tunnel from deck to ground level, then shivered again when I left tunnel for
the poorly-insulated customs office, then out into the rain.

Sliding my coat zipper to my chin, I noticed Bethany hiss in a startled breath as
she followed me outside. She was only wearing a sweater—“You didn’t bring a coat
to Ireland? Are you insane? Do you have any idea what latitude we’re at?”—I shook
my head, but she only shrugged, the humidity crimping the wisps around her freckled
cheeks. Even protected by the windward customs building, the mist started to bead on
the yarn loops of her collar. “Here take mine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I have another jacket.”

“Alright.”
She slid her arms into the oversized rain slicker, leaving the awkwardly large hood down around her shoulders. I stepped back into the slight jut of the office roof as I dug in my backpack for my leather jacket, pulling it on and resettling the pack on my shoulder as the first real drops broke on the concrete. Bethany pulled the drawstring hood tight around her face.

She and I joined the other haulers of soggy luggage, a knot of hoods and damp hems waiting for the bus into the city. The tempo of the rain increased, slowed, subsided into mist, increased again. The invasive water drifted between fabric layers as air before condensing on our skin and clothes. The crowd calculated the minutes by how much moisture was starting to seep through their sweatshirts, drip from their hoods, rise into their shoe soles and the cuffs of their jeans. No one spoke except for the mothers trying to comfort their cold, sleepy children, murmurs fitting softly into the rain. Three drunk men came yelling out of the customs office.

I’d seen them on the ferry: the three Irishmen, somewhere in their mid twenties, who had spent the two hour ferry ride at the tax free bar. Ruddy and sweating, they stood in the Dublin rain with the rest of us, shaking with loud, gut-deep laughter, shoving each other’s shoulders, shouting into each other’s faces, hollering out to nothing and no one. The rest of the crowd shifted and glanced at them, envious of the beer-coats that made their bare heads impervious to the clammy, drifting fog, the summer chill, the sifted rain. Their dark hair plastered around their pale heads, that distinctly Irish bone structure: wide cheekbones and a square forehead, light eyes. But Bethany and I, and the other sad travelers around us, turned pinched lips and strained
expressions towards the loud men, disdaining their decibel level as we huddled outside
the tin shack of the customs office, feeling small and soft beneath the two-hundred
foot gantries and the mile of rusting shipping containers stacked around us. Some
bizarre, post-apocalyptic Tonka toys for giants.

I glanced over at Bethany, no emotion except patient discomfort, and maybe
bland curiosity as she looked around this strange metal gate to the promised city. I
worried she would not love this place as I had come to over two months of living here.
Entering this island by sea was not as romantic as I’d thought, and though the ferry
had seemed like an ocean liner to two Ohio land lubbers, the sudden confrontation
with industrial Dublin—wet smells of rain-soaked nickel, tin, gasoline, asphalt, rust,
the leaden silence and the grave-like still, punctuated by drunk-volume shouts—
assaulted my rural-Ohioan senses as I’m sure it did hers.

I tried to squash my anxiety and imagined slipping an invisible hand of
comfort and anticipation her way—This is not Dublin. Do not think that this is Dublin.
Wait. Wait and see. You will see.

I love central Dublin in the rain—assuming good shoes and a coat—because
the streets clear a bit. The meanderers duck into pubs and cafes—the belly-warmth of
coffee or hearty soup, the rich brown wood after the cold gray streets, the blanket of
human chatter, the freedom to remove clammy layers. Because of rain, Dublin does
creature comforts very well. Pubs glow better for the cold and the wet as I walk down
the street glancing through windows, then forward again towards the traffic of cabs and tilting yellow buses, maybe an actor’s face emblazoned on the back, maybe the sunny palms of Aruba, dripping now with the rain. The windshield arms brush water from the taxis. The sudden brightness of the traffic lights—red, green, white, yellow. The natural damper on the street noise makes me appreciate the individual sounds—the car horn, the tram wheel screech, shouting—the sounds that tell me—This small town girl is not where she was before. I readjust my scarf to close the gap between collar and neck, then walk on.

There’s the old romance of course, about rain, and rain in Ireland. We all know it. The cropped and rhapsodized vistas the brochures and regurgitated legends have passed from the ticket-booth travel agencies—soft green mountains under constant mist, a fierce and rushing sea, little stone walls draped with discarded woolen coats. Always lowering clouds, always rain. As an American I was trained to picture Ireland in green, gray, pale heather browns, slate blues. Never mind that these are postcards from the countryside, where the green fields really do slide beneath the thick-rolling clouds and fall into the granite ocean. But Dublin does not match this snapshot the way the ticket-sellers would have us believe. They give us postcards bearing the capital’s name superimposed on cunningly angled snapshots of Christ Church, St. Patrick’s, Phoenix Park, Malahide Castle ten miles north of Dublin proper—carefully maintaining the chromatic dialectic—blue sky, green trees, gray stone. Sláinte from Dublin! Other postcards are redacted into black and white.
But walk down Fleet Street, through the heart of Temple Bar, one of Dublin’s most well-known and most visited streets. The cobbles might be gray but the buildings are brick or pale plaster, painted like Easter eggs in yellow, blue and white. Then the cellophane-colored storefronts—red, orange, blue, green, black—glistening brighter, lacquered by the running rain, when it rains. The water does not mute the city as it does the countryside. It darkens stone, glosses paint, heightens contrast.

Then turn out onto Dame Street, the sudden rush-river traffic. Pause here. If you want the palette nostalgically bequeathed to the blurry-edged Irish-American diaspora, turn left: granite Corinthians of the Irish Parliament, the cement box of Ulster Bank, slate-toned stone Trinity—all gray and splattered green by the four spindly sycamores around the upraised arm of Henry Grattan, orating with his back to you, water dripping from his bronze coat hem. Turn right for Dublin color, the bright signs and restaurants, red and yellow Apache Pizza, star-spangled Eddie Rockets, dark green awnings of Trinity bar, flying tricolors, Georgian brick, petunias flowering more vibrantly for the water dripping from the second story windows—pink, blue, white, purple. A traffic horn. A yellow door. This is Dublin.

From the upper level of the bus I heard the timbre of the drunken shouting shift. I looked at Bethany then back towards the staircase, “I wonder if drunken boisterousness has slipped into drunken belligerence.”
She turned towards me and tilted her head towards the stairs, listening. “Yeah maybe.” The words were noncommittal, but her tone was light. She pursed her lips and tilted her head left and back, like when she’s about to make a joke at someone else’s expense.

“Yeah drink’ll do that.”

We both half-turned to the man behind us, a long oval face in cappuccino-colored skin, surprisingly dark complexioned for someone with a light Dublin accent. Still the pale eyes though.

“There’s something dark hidden deep in t’Irish heart. People think of us as so happy and cheerful but sometimes drink’ll tip it over the other way,” in a calm, pleasant baritone, his attention shifting between our faces and the bus stairs, as if he too were listening to the drunk men. We hesitated, not sure what to make of his “quoth the raven” conversation starter.

He went on, “We’re world class swearers too. I mean, we just swear up a storm.”

“Well I think that happens everywhere,” Bethany said, “I mean, back home, in the States, you’d think it were a sport.”

“Yeah, I’m afraid we’d win the Olympics though, even Australians aren’t as bad as we are.”

I glanced at Bethany. For some reason the intent larimar eyes in his steep-angled face unsettled me. But I didn’t want to seem unfriendly, so I contributed, “I was so amazed when I came to work in Dublin and people said ‘fuck’ every other
word in the office. I kept having to remind myself, because that’s not acceptable back home.”

He nodded, his eyes out the rain-pebbled window.

By this point the bus was turning out of the docks onto East Wall Road, the chipped brick brightening with water, the metal troughs of the train bridges overhead, corrugated like the shipping containers.

“So do you live in Dublin?” Bethany asked, maintaining conversation.

“Well I’m from Dublin originally,” the stranger replied, his intensity mellowing somewhat as he sat back in his seat, tilted his head, gave himself a history.

“But I live mostly in Denmark now and I travel between here, London and New York for business.” I could see him as an off-duty businessman: incredibly fit but probably in his mid forties, perfectly at ease in his v-neck t-shirt and high-end leather jacket. He slung his luggage around like someone who was used to the exact weight of these exact bags packed and repacked exactly this way. He told us a little about his work, his wife and daughter back in Denmark, what he thought of New York. I don’t remember what his business was, or whether his wife was Danish or not. Or his name, even though he might have mentioned it. The damp city still rocked past the windows, and the bus moved onto Georgian Dublin, the four-story brick buildings north of the Liffey standing ranked in disrepair, their tall paneled windows broken or replaced, the old frames molding and shedding paint slivers, chimneys piled like ceramic pots on high shelves, trash and old paper rotting into the sidewalk. I looked askance at
Bethany, but her eyes, alternating between the man and the window, told me nothing about what she saw. Her slight smile and tilted head were about listening not telling.

“Have you taken the ferry before?” the man asked suddenly, those unnerving eyes squarely on me.

A two second *uh* was all the answer he got.

“It’s just that I’ve seen you before. I’m not good with names but I’m good with faces. I can’t even tell you where I’ve seen you, but I know I’ve seen you before.”

“I road the ferry back from London two weeks ago actually, on the bank holiday.”

He shook his head, “No wasn’t that. I was in New York. Oh well, I know I’ve seen you. You have quite a distinct look.”

Immediately uneasy, not sure whether to thank him for the compliment or tactfully disengage, or maybe pass it off to the short hair, just wanting those unsettling eyes off me, I laughed, “I don’t know,” and looked at Bethany, then back out the window as we came down Amiens Street to the bus station.

“We’ll get off here,” I told her quietly, “the bus might take us closer, but I know where to go from here.”

“Okay.”

We stood to go, swaying as we crossed the tilting deck of the bus, down the stairs on bent knees. “Well have a good visit, ladies!” the man called after us.

“Thanks, have a good trip,” we said almost in unison. I echoed Bet by a slight second. We nodded to the bus driver and set our boots down onto the wet concrete.
Every time I come home to this place my chest swells a little, and sometimes I think I leave just for the feeling of coming back. The first time I left—a solitary venture to Cork—I came home on a late bus feeling slightly harrowed after a missed train, a new ticket, a three hour ride back to Dublin. I left the mostly empty station, stepping out into the cool, clear night, my buckled-leather boots beating steadily on the road. As I turned from Amiens to the quay, the quay to O’Connell, I felt unwarrantedly triumphant. A casual adventurer coming back. A happy sway in my step. That sweetness of return. I was amazed at how quickly I’d attached myself to this place. Barely three weeks, but I was already reading the city’s mood in the layered and punctuated chatter rumbling out the open windows, the number of walkers still on the street.

It was dark, about 10:30, but even on a Sunday evening the city was awake, too warm a night and too few of those in the year to return home for sleep and solitude. The doors of the pubs were propped wide, young men laughing and clapping each other on the shoulders as they wandered in, wandered home, wandered out for a smoke. Musicians still with their trumpets, guitars, flutes and fiddles on the street corners behind open cases, nodding to each hand that appreciated their notes with a fifty-cent thank you—thank you for lightening the night, thank you for giving us something to listen to, for making us feel like the city sings for us. Dublin’s day could be counted in the number of coins splattering the velvet lining.
I stopped and offered my thank you to a young man who’d made an electric guitar out of a Castrol can, sitting easy on his amp, a cigarette hanging from his lip. He looked up at me with deep hazel eyes and nodded. I continued toward the river, savoring. That swelling feeling, high in my chest, right beneath my collarbone, the stepping-back-under-the-lintel feeling, the I-don’t-need-a-map-anymore feeling, the Yes-I’ll-have-a-late-pint-with-you-then-we’ll-walk-home feeling. I pulled the city into my lungs and held it there. I didn’t duck into one of the open-armed pubs for a cider, but I thought about it, perhaps afraid that sitting at the bar alone, too shy to start conversation, would ruin the camaraderie I felt with revelers I passed. Instead I paused on the bridge to see the street lamps cast their yellow globes on the black Liffey. I paused to admire the running beats of the bodhrán sliding out of the shouts and claps of O’Donoghue’s. Some old gents still in their Sunday button-downs and jackets sitting in the corner with thick hands around pints.

I continued. Striding easily, too happy to jaywalk through the busy intersections, too enthralled to care if I got caught in a slow moving crowd. My normal brisk walking pace mellowed, my mind taken with other things.

The sky was clear and deep above, a darkening blue, but the air had a warm weight, like a heavy cotton quilt in the morning. Moisture condensing into sheen on the pavement, a slight pick up in the wind, I sniffed and sensed building water in the air, my skin pricking to goosebumps with barely felt static—When I wake up in the morning it will be raining.
Bethany and I left our soliloquizing friend for the wet streets as I led us around the long colonnade of the customs house, under the shuddering rail lines to the quay, the River Liffey, the city opening on our right into the tall stone of Westmoreland Street, cheerful colors of Temple Bar behind, and snagging the low clouds, barely distinguishable in the gray haze, the spires to two cathedrals. I rolled my tongue a little over the honey-warmth of homecoming to this city that had been mine only two months, knowing how tenuous my claim to Dublin was, letting that make the pride sweeter.

I glanced grinning to Bethany, but she stayed silent, looking uncomfortably conspicuous with my aqua rain jacket over her own brown and heather clothes. I mellowed.

Directly in front of us, the construction by the Tara Street Bridge distracted with its orange tangle and acrid cement smell. I directed her attention in the opposite direction—“That’s a statue of Daniel O’Connell, a major Irish nationalist and political leader, and there’s the Spire, that a cab driver told me you could see from anywhere in the city, which is decidedly not true, and over there you can see the steeple of Christ Church”—but she only nodded and strode on, her long legs whisking her over the sidewalk. I knew I was playing tour guide, spouting the same Lonely-Planet skinny as every tourist herder between here and Grafton, but I couldn’t contain my excitement at her being here, of someone from home coming to this other home, my other home. Be excited with me. This is Dublin! I was trying to be infectious but I was coming off as
trite. The rain started sliding from my hair down over my back. Bethany’s bangs dripped.

And as we walked down the quay towards the O’Connell Street Bridge, we came to the Liffey at low tide, the receded water exposing hub caps and tin cans, twisted bicycles, rugby balls, a bent office chair. All coated with the same brown-black grime, the original of some environmentally minded sculpture. My steps stuttered, startled, then I followed her on. We’ll come back at high tide, we’ll come back and walk along the quay at sunset, we’ll head west with the sun and the steeples in front of us. And it will be like the time I came out of Temple Bar and saw the waxing river lit peach and lavender, flaming to ember orange. And the dome of the Four Courts was silhouetted by the sun. We’ll come back and she’ll see, at high tide.

But for now the mangled river-heap remained. The girl raised in the valley of a national forest clenched, my stomach tightening in on itself. And Bethany, Bethany who had grown up barefoot and flying on acres of farmland. Whose mother viewed pasteurized milk and fluorinated water as cardinal sins, because she—like my own mother—raised her life from the clean, moist earth of a family farm, washed her mouth in well water and cold springs, pulled ripening mulberries from the bushes when she was hungry. Like my own mother who couldn’t fathom why anyone would go to New York, my father who couldn’t understand travel except into backcountry. Bethany’s parents who never strayed far from their twenty acre Eden. Bethany who had just come from hiking the fjords of Norway to visit me in the city, this city I’d waxed poetic over, this stinking pile of metal. I could hear her thoughts—This
J *Jerusalem you’ve brought me to, this place you love? Why do you love it here? Why have you brought me here—I looked over at her again as we crossed onto Westmoreland, “We’re almost to my favorite part of the city.”

She nodded and pursed her lips, a bemused smile.

*Yes, this is the place I love. It’s not all washed up sprockets. This is Dublin.*

Of course I’d forgotten, I’d forgotten that Bethany was entering Dublin just as I had, not when I came home from Cork but when I came from Ohio, carrying the weight of advertised color schemes and over-sold jovial character, the long anticipated realities not lining up with the postcards—expectations built tall on sand.

After my flight from Chicago touched down in Ireland, the cab driver met me in the terminal, took my bags, and asked about my flight as we walked the open air tunnel to the car park. The air had a cool freshness about it. *It must have stormed last night,* I thought, the knocked clean scent that comes after a good downpour. But I shook my head, realizing I wouldn’t be able to gauge the weather here the way I could in Ohio.

“What?” I asked, realizing by his pause and raised eyebrows that the driver’s last sentence had been a question.

He snorted, maybe seeing through my inattention, perhaps assuming I hadn’t understood him through his accent. “I asked what yer ‘ere in Dublin for?”

“An internship,” I answered, still savoring the air. He nodded.
At the car, he stowed my pack in the “boot,” and I automatically went to the right side of the little sedan.

“Ya want’a driver ‘ere, love?” he asked, pulling his jangling wad of keys from his coat pocket and holding them up by his face.

“I’d prob’y kill us both,” I laughed, mildly embarrassed, before I slid into the back seat.

He brought me south through the soft costal green north of the city, heather and blackthorn bending in the off-the-sea breeze. Brightening through coral to delicate blue, the sky hung clear and still like a quiet lake. The four-lane roadway, the bright overhead traffic signs, the green and blue dawn-scape seemed hardly different from the country I’d left and made me wonder if I’d crossed the ocean just to come back to Ohio. But there were no forests, I comforted myself, no deep stands of forty-year trunks stretching back from the roadside, no dark shadows hanging beneath the summer leaves, between the shoulders of the hills. The landscape seemed paler, quieter, a little less earthy, a little less robust. But that could have just been the light of the northern latitude sun, the long sunrise on the southern horizon.

My driver was talking about cyclists: “It’s jus’ de’ cyclists, t’ey’re crazy, y’know, so when y’cross t’street, look lef’, d’en right, d’en lef’ again. D’ey don’ follow any a’d’ rules.” I could see the back of his cap shaking to and fro between the seat back and the headrest.

I nodded and tried to listen, or tried to appear to listen, but I was too busy sifting through the details of the scene outside, noting the yellow bursts of forsythias
amid the green and brown, sucking in a sudden breath at a flash of the flat gray sea, then gone behind another rise. “Forsythias are the first thing to bloom in the spring,” my mother once said.

“Look t’ere, see d’at, d’tunnel? It’s a new tunnel d’ey built for d’trucks. Trucks can only come in’t d’city now before six and aft’r nine, b’cause before every time t’e ferry came t’city would be packed wi’tucks, and d’eyed hit d’cyclists and not feel’t. You ‘ave tunnels like t’is in Ohio?”

“No,” I said, making eye contact with the short, leather-skinned gent in the rearview mirror. His eyes crinkled at me.

“Well, watch out fer d’ose cyclist, y’really must.”

The downy green landscape slid briefly into urban sprawl—warehouses, department stores, parking lots, asphalt. But soon the disarray transitioned to neat terraced rectangles, four story brick, tall paned windows, tall doors, wrought iron gates, so regular they reminded me of dominos or playing cards propped in long rows.

Further south, down to O’Connell’s street—stone post office, stone Penny’s shop, stone statues and grand facades repurposed into Clarks, Subway, Chinese takeout, Dominos, Samsung, Brown Thomas.

“D’is used t’a be d’main street a’dé city, O’Connell’s street. But d’ey let it get too plastic, y’know?” said the driver, “D’ey tried to revitalize’t. D’ey widened it and put in d’e trees, but d’e sout’ is much better, jus’ stay sout’ a d’river.”
As we crisscrossed over the bridge and came down into a brighter part of the city, brick and bright shops. I pointed to a pale steeple poking above the other rooftops—“What’s that? That steeple there?”

“Oh, d’at’s a church.” (Stupid American, don’t ya’ know what churches are?)

(Silly Irishman, I meant what church. What’s its name?).

“T’ough it’s not a church now’a’days. It’s a school, a’t’ink. Lost a lot’a churches here’a late. B’cause d’at child abuse scandle’s so drawn out’ere. T’ere’s anot’er grand ol’ church’s now a club or a restaurant. Yeah, lost a lot’a churches ‘ere.”

Coming into his role as tour guide, he pointed out the different places for groceries, haircuts, medical supplies, phone chargers, pints, live music. I knew I wouldn’t remember any of it.

The streets seemed knotted to me, absolutely nonsensical with nothing running straight, nothing on the right angle, everything one way. Even though I know now that I passed landmarks that I would use every day for more than two months, passed the cafés and pharmacies and parks I would frequent, none of the sights I took in that morning match up with the memories I made later. The Dublin I came to at 7:30 AM April 28th seemed tight, stony, dingy, the dampness in the air smearing old newspapers and tissue bits into the cobble and cement sidewalks. It was all rain and gray, a few green trees, a bright blue sky beginning to cloud over. The streets I know now are so bustling and busy, full of bright pubs and bright people, but when I mentally mapped the city on that first drive from the airport, the expectations built over six months of planning still outweighed the reality in front of me. My memory recorded Dublin
according to postcards, my brain doing its own redacting and filtering out anything that didn’t fit the gray stone, rain, green, blue expectations. And because I tried to fit the city to guide books and Google Maps instead of looking at what was actually there, none of it made sense to me.

The memory of Dublin Day One, the Dublin of brochures and travel ads, never quite lines up with Dublin Day Two, the true city I got to know during that short summer. The two mentally stored and revisited places stay separate, no matter what I do. So why was I so anxious to make Bethany’s Day One impressions into pleasant foundations for attachment and nostalgia?

Walking home through the rainy, low-tide, metal-scented city, I should have realized that homecoming is one of the simplest moments in our relationship with a place, one of the times when the sweetness of familiarity beats back all the lesser flaws and negative associations, little needle pricks we remember after a day or so. Arriving is much more troublesome. Living, everyday with the car exhaust and the ever-present, bone-rotting damp, is troublesome.

Two weeks past Cork, four weeks in Dublin, I came out of Trinity after a failed attempt to obtain a student travel card—“You’re in the right place but the office is only open from 9:00 to 5:00.” It was 5:33, the fastest I could arrive after work. Thwarted, I left the office just as the humidity tipped over into rain. It had been threatening all day, and I should have guessed. Dublin weather so rarely gives you
warning. But I’d forgotten my umbrella, and bus fare or no bus fare, I wouldn’t walk home now. My leather jacket didn’t have a hood, and my thick-soled boots had sprung leaks in both toes.

So I came out of Trinity, to the huddled walkers of College Green, and beyond the water-sleek car tops of Dame Street. Left at the corner, to the nearest 15b stop—Towards Stocking Ave via Rathmines—huddling with all the other downturned hoods and wind-braced umbrellas. We waited. Through the 15, and the 15a, 37, Sorry – Out of Service, 38, 38a, 39a, 70—I must have just missed it—as the water seeped from my toes to my soles, my hair clamped wet around my skull, soaked to the skin from my thighs to my shins, humid everywhere else.

I could almost hear cheering as the bus creaked around College Street, then an anxious rush as it swayed to a stop, everyone suddenly afraid that they would be left to the rain. We funneled to the door and waited. A sad procession of soggy heads, we presented our fare and shuffled past to the filled and dripping seats. I headed up the stairs to the second level, somehow snagging an empty bench on the left and sliding down to the window, letting the corner of my head rest against the glass, eyes on the walkers and waiters outside. I shifted my bag into my lap, slipping in a cursory hand to check my notebooks and paperbacks—as dry as could be expected—then unzipped my jacket to air out. A woman who could have been in her mid twenties or mid forties—she had a sagging, over-aged look about her—slid down next to me, and we swayed back and left as the bus lurched forward, through the rain, 15b, Stocking Ave via Rathmines, Dublin, outside.
The city faded as the windows fogged, the gray streets outside turning white with our breathing. And then all we had were the Crayola-bright ads to hair salons in their painted metal frames, the blank windowpanes. My seat companion fell asleep on her shoulder, maple glaze skin loose over gaunt, sparrow features. A faded red sweatshirt. As we stopped in traffic, I knew we were next to Trinity, but the rough gray stone went unseen. We started to steam. A slight claustrophobia twisting in my stomach as our breath, and then our sweat, erased the world outside. The afternoon sunk clammy and colder towards evening, but the bus went hothouse, all our layers clinging to our humid skin. Motion sickness. We rocked around a corner onto what might have been Kildare Street, down around a mild tint of green, maybe St. Stephen’s. Nausea set in. Back to gray and brown beyond the screen of our own breath, trying to ignore the soggy stink of wet, stale air, a human bog. Breathe shallower, I thought, *How many stops to home, how many stops to home.*

I was still playing tour guide when we reached the heart of the city, that heavy corner of government, finance, higher education, and beer, where Temple Bar, Trinity, and Grafton meet—“Down that way’s Dublin Castle, and over there’s a little bookshop I love, little hole in the wall, and one of my favorite pubs is around that way, maybe we’ll go there tonight, they’ve got good music usually, and over here, this is the Molly Malone statue”—with a mascot-worthy leprechaun posing for photos, putting his hand out for coins, his velvety green shoulders matted with wet.
Bethany pulled the drawstring hood tighter around her face, nodding, asking an occasional question about this monument, these shops, that pub with a dime-a-dozen jig reeling out the door, or the speakers above the door—Authentic?—I looked over at her—Touristy. We turned onto Grafton—“This is my favorite street in Dublin, it’s pretty touristy but it has a great atmosphere, usually, not now because it’s raining, but usually there are tons of street musicians and performers. I’ve seen four piece bands, and saxophonists, and panpipers, even a harpist and a guy playing a huge hammer dulcimer. And there’s a man who comes every day with a towel full of sand, and he packs the sand down and sculpts a sleeping Labrador out of it. I see him every time I come up here, well not today, because it’s raining.”

I knew I was babbling, but the brick and cobble street was nearly deserted, a few women muscling forward with umbrellas, a few young men racing by holding newspapers over their heads. The shops were all closed or closing, the metal grates sliding down over the front doors and window displays. Only the gelato shop stayed open, its mounds of lumpy cream looking melty and unappealing. A man crossed in front of us with a string bass on his back, water dripping from his ball cap bill.

Coming out the other side to St. Stephen’s Green, we joined the hunched crowd waiting for the tram. And when it came we pressed ourselves on and stood quiet and soggy, watching the raindrops stream down the windows, barely focusing on the darkening city slipping towards evening, too focused on the warmth and dryness of this yellow-lit tube screaming over the rails, and the braced columns of dripping coats and pant hems swaying back and forth, shifting our weight to the tilts of the tram, lean
left, lean right, brace against the hand strap, brace against the door. All eyes down, no one talking—*How many stops to home, how many stops to home.*

Four days later we are on a train, heading for a weekend on the west coast. After haggling for our tickets, sprinting for the train, almost missing the train, we are happy for our place sitting on the floor, for the first ten minutes. Now we keep getting stepped on, shuffled, eyed like freight hoppers, even though we hold our very dear tickets tight in our fists. Our bags in our laps, backs to the wall. The circulating air coming out of the baseboards blows frigid, and the air is heavy with humidity. I’m starting to shiver and take off my jacket to block the air behind me—“Excuse me”—pull in our toes that have been slowly transgressing further into the aisle. The woman’s voice is patient but her patience is lost to the noise of the train—announcements to first class passengers, and “Due to the number of people on the train there will be no trolley service on this route to Cork,” the chatter of full seats and full aisles, people sitting in the baggage area and we wish we were too, babies crying.

Rain starts as we pull out from the station, pattering on the roof of the train, turning the outside to smoky haze and improving no one’s mood. Twisting out of the city over the thunka-thunk of the sleepers, we keep trying to sleep but it’s no use. I keep trying to read Joyce but that’s no use either. The last thing I want is a migraine, so I hand *Dubliners* off to Bethany, and she wades into the last few stories. A young
man is asleep by the bathroom door, draped over his suitcase in dress pants and a wrinkled button-down shirt, his mouth slightly open.

The Portlaoise stop announced. The muscles of our stomachs clench as we slow and stop, counteracting inertia half-heartedly. I pull my feet in, knees tight against my chest, closing my eyes and praying people will get off not on. Not daring to look at the waiting faces on the platform, faces made into faded vignettes by the rainy windows.

The doors open and the damp, cold air rushes in, carrying with it the smell of grass and trees, leaves opening into rain, surging up from their roots in the moist, black earth, running water, wildflowers releasing pollen—butterwort, samphire, dark red helleborine, purple thistles—tree bark darkening with rain, shadowed undergrowth among the roots, layers of faded leaves sinking down into the soil, mushrooms and ferns raising up brown heads and green fronds, breathing, all breathing, and drinking in the rain. As the doors close I lower my chin and look at Bethany—“The air!”

She turns to me with an exaggerated inhale, green eyes bright, “I know.”
I leapt awake, a right angle in my bed, back straighter than the back edge of a knife blade. Then I slouched again, confused by the alertness machete-slicing through the very pleasant dream still blurring the edges of my brain. I glanced around. My little Dublin bedroom glowed in the harsh sunlight streaming under and above our heavy curtains—stained tan carpet, wooden beds, wooden dresser, white sheets, white curtains, white walls, wooden wardrobe. I looked at my clock—5:37 AM—two hours before my alarm. I assumed the northern-hemisphere sunrise had woken me.

A sharp bang out the window, so like a gunshot that a practical voice in my head warned me not to pull back the curtain—*don’t draw a flicker of attention to yourself.* Again, the sound so loud it felt like my chest compressed for a split second, my heart squeezed between breastbone and spine. I paused with my finger on the curtain hem.

The sun streamed strong beneath the thick fabric, an hour past sunrise and obviously cloudless. I couldn’t imagine gunshots in this quiet Dublin suburb, a shooter amidst the bay windows, bright doors, brick garden walls draped in roses. I pulled back one corner of the curtain, shocked by the bright blue sky over the terracotta chimneys, so much sunlight where I’d expected danger. But a second later I saw smoke billowing black. Dark, oily air reaching up above the roofs into the clear blue. A dumpster sat on the opposite side of the street, full of furniture—tables, bookcases, cabinets, carpet, chairs—with flame arrowing upwards until its forked tip
licked into smoke. I watched, waiting for a fire engine, waiting for action. The
curtain directly across the road, barely right of the flame, twitched and pulled back.
Three children—two boys and a girl—in Saturday-cartoon pajamas. The girl and the
elder boy stood whispering to each other, the youngest sitting on the bed with his
fingers in his mouth. As I watched the top of the curtain flicked back too, a father’s
furrowed brow appeared and was gone.

The four of us kept watching, watching the flames blacken the contents of the
dumpster, watching neighbors come out in bathrobes and towel-turbans to stand cross-
armed in their gardens, all eyes on bonfire at the center of our little street.

Eventually the fire engines arrived, red and screaming, thick-clothed figures
jumping down, unreeling hoses. We watched as they dowsed the flames, white steam
bulging into the sky. I could barely see the kids across the street. As the flames
lowered, the smoke and the loud popping sounds persisted, and the firemen went in
with heavy gloves, pulling out charcoaled-table legs and blackened rugs, trying to get
at the heart of the fire.

The job was almost done when I left my bed, dressed, grabbed my backpack
and headed for the train station. I was meeting friends for a weekend trip to Ireland’s
west coast—hike in the Burren region, spend the night in a little surfing town called
Lahinch, see the famed Cliffs of Moher. When I walked out my front door in my thick
leather boots, the fire was over and the engines gone. I paused to look at the
blackened wreckage and scattered ashes as I passed, paused to read the patterns in
these old bones cast from someone’s home, set ablaze. Enough fires have happened in
my life that they always make me strangely alert, expectant, nervous, edgy. I continue through my day flinching at the strike of a match, too worried to light the candles I usually enjoy. I wait and watch. My past fires didn’t come alone. “Bad things happen in threes,” my father says, but for me, fires happen in pairs. If one finds me, I slink around like an alley cat until the second shows itself.

_We all live in a house on fire,_

_no fire department to call; no way out,_

_just the upstairs window to look out of_

_while the fire burns the house down_

_with us trapped, locked in it._

– Tennessee Williams

As if to reassure me, the weather turned wet as we took the train west across the country. The brick and gray stone of Dublin faded through urban warehouse sprawl into gently tilting fields lined with trees. Cows, sheep and tall chestnut horses grazing across the misty green. Then we came into County Clare, and the hills steepened into small mountains, the fields succumbed to the cracked-limestone moonscape of the Burren, round hills clad in veined rock for miles. Ivy and heather growing through the cracks, pale hazel bushes covering the ground with thicket wherever the stone gave way. We arrived at the surfing town of Lahinch in the late
afternoon, a little soggy from the light rain that had fallen since we passed into
Ireland’s western half.

At the behest of a few (male) members of our party, we stopped in a pub to
watch the Dublin versus Ulster rugby match. Flanagan’s was piled to the rafters, a
line of older men at the bar in the front room—an old bartender, possibly the owner,
calling them by name and making sure to keep them with full cups. The royalty of the
house. Then deeper into the back rooms, into crowds of twenty and thirty-something
men—sitting, standing, shouting, hitting the air with their fists, lunging out of their
seats when either team neared the goal line, sinking back when they lost possession.

We found a corner in front of the huge stone fireplace, set blazing against the
damp and chill even though it was mid May. I suppose I might have been nervous, but
hearths feel so different than loose flame, and standing on the hearthstone felt like
reclaiming normalcy, relegating fire to heat-giver. My friend Gwen and I shed our
dripping layers while Ashley went for drinks—“Cider all around?” I nodded and set
my coat and scarf on the hearthstones at my feet, carefully to keep them far enough
from the flames, but close enough to dry out a bit before I’d have to put them back on.
Drinks in hand, we shouted at each other, trying to make sense of the game in front of
us—

“Is it like football where if you get tackled you start over?” Gwen asked.

“It doesn’t seem to be, look there they go,” Ashley pointed.

“But they just did something like a touchdown, then a conversion,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s like football, but not everything.”
“Looks like they can only pass the ball backwards?”

But after a while our lack of progress wasn’t worth the strain on our vocal chords, and we resigned ourselves to ignorance. A trio of young men stood in the corner opposite us. One—dark haired with a slight beer gut—slid off his stool and offered it to Gwen. The other two followed suit, offering their chairs to those of us standing closest to them.

The third—shorter with a wrestler’s build and wide cheekbones—noticed me still standing and cast around for another stool. Glancing at me from blue agate eyes.

I held up a hand—“That’s alright”—content to stand on the hearth with my back to the fire, my pint sitting on the mantle, my back drying quickly in the steady heat. He nodded and turned back to the match.

A score for Dublin, a score for Ulster, the thick players running and then suddenly wrestling in a human lattice of arms and backs, the four numbers at the top of the screen inching past each other. It felt like listening to a news report in a foreign language. “Northern scum!” “Up Ulster!” “C’mon Dubs!”

Nearing the end of the game, I brought my glass down from my lips and paused—the shops across the street were gone. From where I was standing, I could see through the front room to the glass door, out onto the street. The pubs and restaurants across the way, only fifteen feet of cobbles between Flanagan’s and its companions, were completely invisible, obscured by a thick white cloud. I glanced around, but all eyes were fixed on the TV screen and the fresh Dublin possession that might secure the game. “Go, go! Up Dubs!” Even the rugby-illiterate Gwen had drank
enough cider to become a fan. She clenched her fist on her thigh, muttering encouragement under her breath. I left my drink on the mantle and slid out around the tables. Three feet from the door I smelled the cinders, the sharp smell of ash that can comfort or nauseate depending on the circumstances. But I had the better part of a pint circulating through my body, and any anxiety stirred up by the morning’s fire had ebbed into curiosity. I opened the door and walked straight out into the smoke filled street.

Even four strides into the smoke—halfway across I’d guess—I couldn’t see the opposite side, not a wisp of shape or color ahead. When I looked back, I could see the bright red front of Flanagan’s. I could hear the shouts as the match intensified. But everything else streamed with thick white coils that broke apart and bled into each other as they moved past me up the street. At some moments I could hear the tide crashing into the nearby harbor, at other points the crack of something burning. I could hear shouting. But the sounds shifted with the smoke. They peaked and ebbed, sometimes sharp as a shout in my ear, sometimes disintegrating in whispers. They slipped around me, crescendoing and fading, changing direction. The wind blew the darkening cloud left up the street, but I couldn’t have said for sure where the fire actually was. Unnerved, I turned around and walked back into the pub, feeling like I was waking up from a strange dream as I came back into the boisterous, sweaty, human crush and resumed my place next to Gwen. She leaned over as if I’d said something she couldn’t hear.
“Two fires in one day,” I said, somewhat to myself, somewhat afraid, somewhat relieved—fire two unmasked. I felt the weight of this strange coincidence, the strangeness of another pair of fires, the strangeness that no one else had paid any heed. Why was I the only one to see it? To take any notice? Two fires in one day. Then I berated myself for attributing meaning to coincidence, for peering after ghosts in the dark, looking for signs, being silly.

“What!” Gwen shouted over the roar—“Up Dublin!” “C’mon Dubs.”

I looked over her shoulder and caught the blue-eyed wrestler watching me. A bit of memory quivered in the pit of my stomach.

“Two fires in one day,” I repeated, but Dublin had just closed the match and my words were lost to victory shouts.

_The communication of the dead_

_is tongued with fire_

_beyond the language of the living._

- T. S. Elliot

_Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord._

- Jeremiah 23:29

Of course there is some arrogance here. The implication that somehow my chance encounters with blazes are a sign, a fingernail scraping at the veil, smacks of
hubris. But anyone who contemplates their “destiny” must have a touch of hubris in
the blood, must be a little arrogant, or maybe just human.

Who is like God?

- Battle cry of Michael the Archangel,

Paradise Lost

The god who answers by fire, he is God.

- 1 Kings 18:24

My stirrings towards star-charted delusions are not helped by circumstance:
my first fire was in Israel, a land known to drive men to divinity-inspired, divinity-
seeking, divinity-I-am insanity. I was biking around the Sea of Galilee with Maggie,
up past the little bit of boulder-strewn shore where the apostle Peter cried, “It is the
Lord!” and leapt from his boat. We rode up to the top of the dried-grass hill from
which Jesus proclaimed his Sermon on the Mount—“Blessed are the meek, the pure in
heart, the merciful, the peacemakers.” Up to the town of Capernaum where a Roman
centurion ordered a synagogue built for the Jews of the town, where he accosted
Jesus—“Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof but say the word
and let my servant be healed.” And the synagogue stands: long white columns,
Corinthian feet, pavers as long as my torso and tall as my waist. Maggie and I had set
our sandals on the stones, looking up at the still-standing arches, the half-tumbled walls.

When we were returning to Tiberius, biking back down the long seventeen miles through 120 degrees, we saw smoke on the horizon, a leaden black smear across the blue of the sky, extending from the heat-drowned hills of prickly brown, out over the muddy shallows of the sea, towards the squat towers of the city.

“We have to return the bikes by six,” Maggie said.

And when we came to the edge of the blaze the policewoman turning the cars away came and spoke to us, “The fire is mostly above the road now,” she said. “It is mostly gone,” in her lilting, Hebrew-inflected English. “There is a path along the sea. You may walk your bikes that way.”

We took hold of our handlebars and pushed our way through the smoke and the black-charred landscape, past the metal exoskeletons of cars burned through. I remember them without doors, but I can’t find a logical reason for why the doors would be missing. We pushed through the bits of burnt-something floating down in papery bits the size of movie tickets, the consistency of dried Elmer’s glue pulled off fingertips, the dull gray of graphite. I started laughing hysterically, confused by my own non-reaction, non-fear, non-awe to the cinder landscape around us, to the smoke-dulled sun. “What the hell is this!” I laughed, “I mean what the hell what are we doing? What the hell is happening? What the hell is this?”

“Stop, Annie,” Maggie said quietly, bending her back behind her bicycle handles, her breath coming short from stifled lungs.
“I mean it Mags,” giggling, “This is the weirdest shit. Our last fucking day in Israel. What the hell? This is hysterical.”

“Be quiet, Annie. Please, please be quiet.”

So man’s insanity is heaven’s sense.

- Moby Dick

For our God is a consuming fire.

- Hebrews 12:29

And when Maggie and I came out of the black, flickering hills, Tiberius seemed like a festival. The little boardwalk of weathered gray planks along the dirty water, lit with the neon scribbles of walk-up vendors, street-food sellers—like a county fair, a Fourth of July barbeque, like Mardi Gras. We bought big drippy cones of raspberry gelato, bubble-gum colored juice making our fingers sticky in the July heat. I bought lamb shwarma with diced, confetti-colored veggies wrapped in a warm pita. I swear it was the best thing I’ve ever tasted.

We came down a set of rickety stairs to where Arab woman sat billowing in their burkas. The sun was setting lilac over the orange-tinted mountains, and between the deep, shadowy shoulders of the eastern shore, the dimness of the sky, I couldn’t tell if smoke still tinted the air. Maggie and I watched the women swim with their fabric undulating like big jelly-fish sheets around them. We watched them call to
children making little, pebble towers with plastic pails and shovels. We walked down the grimy, twenty-foot beach littered with wrappers and washed-up fish bits. We took off our sandals. We told each other those secret stories—“I tried to starve myself when I was fifteen” “My mom has post traumatic stress disorder” “I might be manic-depressive”—and the translation is—“I trust you this much now. Do you understand what I am saying? We have crossed through a doorway, you and I.”

I stood knee deep in the sluggishly rolling water, shifting my feet on the roughness of the gravel bottom. “I need to break up with Ian,” I said to her.

Sudden clarity about a four-year relationship I’d assumed wouldn’t expire. But the whole month in Israel I’d felt that assumption slip. Somehow coming through the fire had crystalized my decision. “I know I need to.”

“I think you do too,” Maggie said, looking at the soft-edged cedar trees turning blue on the far shore. We dove into the sickly smelling water and rinsed the smoke scent out of our clothes.

* I baptize you with water for repentance’s sake.
* But he who is mightier than I is coming . . .
* He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

- Proverbs 17:3

A month later I’d returned to college. I’d broken up with Ian and then, within a month, completely reversed my decision just as he entered a committed relationship.
with a coworker. Confused, rejected, angry and always hopeful, I hung around the edges of his life, making coffee dates I knew I shouldn’t make, inviting him into my the dorm room as if it were my living room and not also my bedroom.

We were sitting on my floor, about 11:00 pm, with little bits of quartz and amethyst between us. He was showing me “stone working,” something he’d taken up during our summer apart. He picked up each tumbled-smooth lump, explaining its properties and how its energy could be harnessed and manipulated. I was curious but wary, and pretending not to be. It seemed like a strange blend of old paganism and new metaphysics, something out of the fantasy novels I’d read in high school. After he set each stone down, I picked it up, pressing it with my eyes and my fingertips, questioning it, testing to see if it would push back, wondering if this was all insanity.

When I couldn’t stare any harder at the unforgiving little pebbles, I told him about Israel, about Jerusalem, about Tel Aviv and Galilee, about how being with Maggie—so sturdy and responsible—had given me the freedom to be childish, foolish, flighty, reckless. “It’s so odd,” I muttered, “I didn’t think I was any of those things.”

“Of course you are,” he said, fingering a chipped hunk of garnet the size of a cherry. “You’re a fire sign.”

I started, both at the nod to this nature-energy worldview, and at the insinuation that the worldview impacted me even if I was indifferent towards it. Star signs belonged to my preteen years, to monthly horoscopes in Seventeen Magazine, March 21 – April 19, Aries. They belonged to sitting with friends on public library beanbag chairs, giggling between the librarian’s raised-eyebrow rounds while we read
projections for the ram, the scorpion, the fishes. Those memories of divination were stored right next to predicting prom dates with daisies, right next to taking flow-chart quizzes to find out what flower, gemstone or sports car represented our true selves. Hadn’t I sloughed off star signs along with the silliness of he-loves-me-he-loves-me-not, with an identity based on lilac, sapphire and corvette? And hadn’t Bill Nye said something about the earth wobbling since the time of the first Babylonian astrologists? Wasn’t I a Pisces now anyway? If I’d had to pick an element at either thirteen or nineteen, I would have chosen water—fluid, flexible, creative. Thinking of myself as fire—which he seemed to find so self-evident—was completely foreign.

And yet the thought followed me. How accidentally powerful for this person to suggest that he knew me better than I did. How seductive and dangerous for him to say, “You are confused about yourself? It is so clear. Let me illuminate it. Let me tell you. You are fire.” And I remembered it, even in my confusion, even in my underlying unease, in my knowledge that I shouldn’t put stock in this, that these words were a product of a belief set I did not subscribe to, one that he would not subscribe to for very long. And yet the insinuation stayed—You are fire—it followed me, like a song you don’t remember hearing, but which you start humming as soon as your mind slips off to other things.

*Time is a river which carries me along,*

*but I am the river;*

*it is a tiger that devours me,*
but I am the tiger;

it is a fire that consumes me,

but I am the fire.

- Jorge Luis Borges

A month later, fists slamming against my door woke me at three thirty in the morning.

“Annie! Annie wake up!”

“Annie!” two freshmen who lived on my floor, four pounding fists, drumming erratically. I shook my head against the noise, muttering, reaching for my lamp, my bathrobe, something to clothe my nakedness. Ian rolled over next to me.

“What’s going on?” he murmured.

“I dunno.”

Still pounding all four fists, “Annie, there’s a fire!”

I slammed open my door, Lee and Thom’s eyes were dark and wide, back-lit by the hallway light that was always on. The dark blue night out the glass windows. Tile floor filmed with the overlaid steps of many shoes fresh from September rains. And underneath, a rustling sound, inconsistent, rising and dying, like a slow, heavy step through dry leaves. Crackling.

Five bare-foot steps to the common room door, wrenching back the old hinges. Flame, yellow-veined red, splitting and twisting from my feet to high over my head, an armchair on fire, the curtain edges flicking in the heat and smoke, their hems
beginning to smolder and burn. I ran around it to the two hallways where other students were already stumbling out of their rooms, holding up thin palms to shield their eyes.

“Go outside, get everyone outside,” my voice sounded deeper than my usual airy soprano. I was shouting over the blaze but my throat didn’t know it. Pounding on doors, pulling fire alarms, shouting, pounding on another door, “There’s a fire, get outside.” Shadows stumbling and waving their arms through the trapped smoke.

I checked and double checked, doors open, rooms empty. Then I walked—eyes down, refusing make contact with the fire—back out into the hallway, back out into light and clear air.

Someone was bellowing, shouting a single, fog-horn syllable—“Anne, Anne, Anne.” Ian stormed out of my room, caught sight of me, clamped his hands around my shoulders, pulled me inches from his face, blue irises wide. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine—“

“Are you okay?”

I stayed quiet and let him look me over, his steel blue eyes scanning, methodical, reading line by line. I waited and felt his grip loosen. His eyes steadied.

“We have to make sure everyone gets out,” I said. “Can you go outside and try to calm people down.” Low, level words, even breathing.

“I just saw you walk into a burning room.” His left thumb dug into my collarbone.
But he let go and walked straight out the door, perhaps forgetting that he was not wearing a shirt. I crossed to the other hallway and knocked gently on the last few doors.

*Words are only painted fire; a look is the fire itself.*

- Mark Twain

Outside in the streetlamps, soles picking up black grit on wet asphalt, weaving through the fifty people leaning out of the drizzle like limbless black trees. “First floor over here!” I shouted, cuing fifteen trunks to shuffle my way, “Nathan! Zee! Sam! Alex Boggs! Alex Merrill! Ben!”—counting and recounting. “Cody do you have everyone from second floor?”

“We’re missing one, but they think he’s at his girlfriend’s. We’re calling to make sure.”

“Yeah keep calling.” Turning, scanning the crowd, recounting. Ian leaning against a lamppost in a borrowed sweatshirt, telling jokes to the girls from 105, their white teeth flashing.

Flinching when the wailing fire engines rounded the corner, horns blaring. Everyone stopped, stared. We wrapped our arms over our chests and huddled in the budding rain, watching the orange light flicker through the first floor windows. The glass shattered with a high-pitched shriek, and we watched the pieces fall on the grass.
This is the second death, the lake of fire.

- Revelation 20:14

They let us come back that afternoon—to get clothes and shoes and wallets and keys, cell phones and textbooks. It had been pouring all day, and the firefighters led us through the black wreckage of the common room, water and damp air blowing in through the empty window frames, brushing underneath the charred tatters of the curtains. We tiptoed in the ash, walking gingerly around the singed and sooty remains of furniture, a table that looked like it was kneeling, one leg blackened to brittleness, collapsed. The walls faded from dark charcoal baseboards, to white-bellied middles, to gray ceilings where the smoke had risen and stayed. We felt like hand-colored figures in a black-and-white photograph. We stalked like struck dogs around the ceiling lamp. The plastic florescent had melted off the ceiling so that it hung like a strange, thin curtain, like a stalactite smudged with black, at the center of the room. I held the door open as people came through with their arms full, catching each other with vacant eyes.

I will kindle a fire in your forest,

and it shall devour all that is around you.

- Jeremiah 21:14
As the student employee for that floor, I had many responsibilities in the next few months—negotiate a new living place for the suddenly-close community of floor-mates, negotiate a place for us to live together, find counseling for those who needed it, help everyone move, say goodbye to those who would not make the move with us, say goodbye to those who were transferring to different universities, who were dropping out of college. Go to the police station, give one deposition, then another, then another, a court subpoena in the spring. We found out that one of the young men on the floor had set the fire, had dumped kerosene all over the chair and the floor, lit it with the blue lighter that he liked to toss in the air, the one he used to light his best friend’s pipe. We found out that his best friend Sam had unknowingly given the damning testimony, the unassuming lynchpin of a poster found burnt in the hallway two weeks earlier. Sam cried in my room, shouting that his deposition didn’t mean anything, that the police were idiots, pulling at his bright red curls with pale hands. He didn’t come back in the spring.

Three days after the fire, I came into my room and started packing, pulling out old computer-paper boxes, wrapping my mugs in t-shirts, putting my clothes under trash bags. The tops of all my books were black with soot, the acrid smell making me rise to the balls of my feet, standing skittish like someone who’s heard a rifle shot while walking in the woods. I stacked them in boxes according to size. When everything was out, I stood in the doorway with the watery light through the hallway windows behind me, my room a strange painting where all the vertical surfaces shone clean, but all the horizontal surfaces were black. I’d left my door open that night, and
the smoke had come in. Cody had lost his grandfather’s guitar to smoke damage. Ella threw out her comforter a month later, because weekly washings hadn’t muted the smell. I shut the door on my old room and handed over the key.

In the new place, we all walked quietly. Living very deliberately in the same patterns we had before, but at a lower decibel, consistent but muted. We felt the need to be careful of each other. Jack didn’t play guitar for weeks. Nathan gave up smoking for the first month, because he didn’t like carrying his lighter with him. I caught Alex throwing her illicit candles into the dumpster, giving up the raspberry scent we associated with her so strongly. If someone knocked a little too loudly on my door, I instantly smelled smoke.

And I kept having dreams where I’d come home—always to my old room—the bright orange sunlight of late afternoon streaming through the hallway. I’d come home and go for my keys, bringing them to the knob, only to notice the door was ajar by an inch. I’d push it open and find my room in disarray, all the crannies where I hide keepsakes or extra cash turned out like pockets, the contents strewn around. Someone had been in my room, someone who knew my habits, someone looking for something. But I could never figure out what they’d stolen, or if they’d taken anything at all. I’d go out into the common room, the boys playing cards at the kneeling table—“Has anyone been in my room?” They’d shrug, “We didn’t see anybody.”

I’d go back in. In the middle of the floor, a small pile of charred bits, still smoldering. In the bathroom I’d soak a towel and dab at the burning pile. It would
burst into flame. I’d grab a bucket from the janitor’s closet, fill it, dump it over the burning bits, and the flame would flare up high as if the water had been kerosene, flashing towards the ceiling. I’d go back to the common room for help.

“Annie, there’s no fire. No one has been in your room. If something were burning there would be smoke. Nothing is on fire.”

“I am!”—a heavy fist on my door, “Annie are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” disentangling myself from the clotted blankets.

“Okay, just checking,” voice carefully light, measured. “We were just walking by.”

“I’m fine,” I repeated. I rolled over in bed, my eyes on the door. Ian stayed over often—having finally decided on me and not his coworker, after a month of dipping his fingers in both pots—but he always slept heavily. My nightmares rarely woke him. I’d get up and go hunting through the empty halls of the dormitory, looking, double-checking, fire sign.

“Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire?
Who among us can live with the everlasting burnings?”

- Isaiah 33:14

“Have you seen him lately?” Gwen asked as we left the office. It was almost four weeks since our weekend in Lahinch, and she was talking about Darragh, the
blue-eyed wrestler from the Flannagan’s who’d introduced himself later that night, a native Dubliner, my most recent shtick.

“We saw Great Gatsby a couple days ago,” I said nonchalantly, still trying to play it off as nothing, because I knew her Irish date had gone radio silent, and because I didn’t want to talk about it. Because I’d ended things with Ian for a final time only two months before, and I wasn’t ready to even hint at deep emotional investment. I hoped she would drop the subject.

“That’s nice,” she said, transferring her keys, phone and notebook from desk to backpack. “Taige and I wanted to see World War Z, but it wasn’t out yet. I haven’t heard from him in a week though.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” I said tentatively, resigning myself to a fifteen minute walk talking about her fizzling relationship with the lanky teenager. I glanced out the window, praying it wouldn’t rain. It was cloudy but dry that day, the sky a level white that left hardly any shadows. It made the world feel like a room lit only by fluorescents.

We left the office, nodding to the warehouse men out having a smoke—“Bye Andy, bye Alex”—“See ya t’morrow girls”—and made our way through the urban sprawl of car dealerships and furniture stores, a café or barbershop tucked in the corners between businesses and the breathless little brick houses rubbing shoulders in long terraces. As we walked, I looked across the street, past the rooftops, noticing a thick twist of smoke growing into the northern sky, just a shade darker than the clouds behind.
I pointed, “I wonder what that smoke is from. It hasn’t ever been there before has it?” wondering for a moment if it was from a power plant or factory.

But Gwen didn’t hear me. She was babbling, tilting her head as she spoke, looking at the ground—“I mean, I really want to hear from him, but I don’t want to seem too desperate you know?” lifting and lowering her hands as if she were hitting the backs against a tabletop.

I tried to focus on her, but kept one eye on the dark column to the west. “I don’t think you should worry about seeming desperate,” I said, dishing out the simplest, shortest thought in my head.

Gwen certainly wasn’t concerned, “I know but like, last night when I texted him he might have already been in bed, and if he just hasn’t looked at his phone since he got up—“

I tried not to shake my head at the thought of a nineteen-year-old not looking at his phone for two hours let alone twenty-four. I kept my mouth shut, paying less and less attention. She talked less and less as my responses shortened and stopped, lapsing into fidgeting silence as we boarded the bus. I was selfishly grateful, consumed with my own thoughts and the view out the window, the city rocking by, the corded smoke billowing and blowing away into the atmosphere. I wondered what was burning.

From my vantage point, the bus’s route seemed to rotate around the smoke, never getting closer, never moving father away, as if we were attached to a string, the other end tied somewhere in the heart of the unseen fire. We never approached, never fled,
only maintained this watchful distance from the burning something. I didn’t look away. I felt as if some spell would break, some thread would snap if I did.

_The memory lapses of trauma are conjoined with a tendency to compulsively repeat, relive, be possessed by and act out traumatic scenes of the past . . ._

- Dominick LaCapra

Eventually the bus turned east, our backs now to the blaze, heading into the city. Up Kimmage Road, past the grassy sliver of Harold’s Cross, Gwen got off at her stop—tossing a despondent “see ya” over her shoulder as she went down the stairs. The tinge in my stomach gripped a little tighter, the guilty coexistence of wanting to cheer her up, wanting her to grow up, and wanting her to shut up. I barely noticed as the bus lurched forward but immediately slowed—_just rush hour traffic_, flickered a split second across my mind, then was gone. It wasn’t until the police car lights flashed through the window, that I looked up: orange barricades, blue and yellow squad cars, a long line of gawkers leaning against the shop fronts with furrowed brows and crossed arms. They reminded me of the ringed, angry-looking guards I’d seen in old videos of wartime executions, watching, absolutely still, stern, stolid, their eyes dark under heavy brows.

I followed their solemn gazes across the street, out the window on the other side of the bus—a second fire, a brick shop hollowed and smeared black with ash,
smoke still oozing sluggishly from its upper windows. Policemen directed traffic while fire fighters crunched over the debris-strewn ground, coming and going through the dark mouth of the door-less entrance. They stooped under the half-fallen lintel with axes in their hands. The windowpanes were shattered on the street, the remaining glass making patterns like the edges of spider webs.

I stared unabashedly with the rest of the crowd, feeling that slow uncoiling in my stomach, something uncanny—*the dead is tonged with fire, it shall devour all around you. I just saw you walk into a burning room. I am the fire*—I thought about Darragh and our plans to meet at a pub later that night. I started planning how I would tell him about the fires—“I saw two fires on the way home from work today”—I thought about telling him the Galilee story, the arson story. I would leave out the fact that Ian had been there. I would leave out the matching shade of their eyes.

Shattering as a fireman’s ax burst through the last shards clinging to the window frame, making way for some heavy equipment to be hoisted through. They all stood back as the glass bits clinked on the sidewalk. I shook my head to clear it. Then the bus turned the corner and slid away.
I watched Bethany as she hunched over her phone, sitting on my bedroom floor with her laptop in front of her. “No, well I got the tests done before I went abroad, and she said she would email me the results within a few weeks, but—yeah—you can? That would be great—of course take your time,” her thumb tapping urgently against her thigh, she shifted and picked bits of fuzz off her pants with growing anxiety.

I watched her from the side of the room, leaning against the dresser, one hand in my pocket, trying to be confident and nonchalant, trying to be some sort of anchor against her tense flutterings. But as she waited for the verdict from her blood work, the strain mounted too high, the stress in her sudden stillness too intense, the pressure behind my own breastbone too tight, the immobilizing clench of only being able to watch. I escaped down the hall to the bathroom, walking quickly, running my hands under the faucet for no reason, letting the cool water carry some heat away from my skin, looking at my deadpan expression in the toothpaste-splattered mirror—flat brown eyes in a pale oval face, the corners of my mouth tight, my collarbone rising in the short, even breaths of forced calm.

I rubbed my hands on my jeans, and as I walked back towards the door, Bethany jumped through it. “Negative!” she shouted, flinging her arms around my
shoulders. “The tests were negative. I don’t have cancer. I don’t have cancer! Oh my
gosh—” She backed up and held out her arms, palms up, eyes closed, as if she were
basking in my wining ceiling light. Then she reanimated, jumping up and down and
stomping her feet. “Yes, yes yes. So relieved, I’m so relieved.”

I shouted and joined in her stomp dance, “That’s great, that is so incredibly
great.” We grabbed each other’s shoulders and spun around the room, laughing and
screaming until our rotations slowed and stopped.

“Phew,” she sighed, relaxing, then put her hands on her hips, grinning.

“All right, I’d say this calls for celebration. Let’s go get drunk, Annie. I mean really,
let’s go get really drunk.”

“All right,” I said, shaking my head and grinning back at her, “Let’s go get
drunk.”

O’Neill’s was already thronging when we stepped under the hanging petunia
baskets and into the honey-tones of woodwork and yellow lamps. We waded through
the press to a round table by the stairs, shucking off bags and layers in the room’s
close, human heat.

“All right, time for the first round, what’d you want?” Bet asked.

I tilted my head, never knowing what to buy beyond my safety zone of hard
cider and white wine. “I dunno, get what you want.”
She slipped off through the crowd, doing exactly what all my male friends complain about when we’re at bars or music gigs—“Of course she got to the front of the stage, she’s a woman.” Bet and I had always scoffed at them, waved our hands, said they were just making excuses. But as Bethany made her way to the bar—through men stacked five deep, using a little touch on their shoulders, a quiet word, so that they stepped aside just enough for her to slide through, the way I knew I did as well when moving through crowds—I wondered how much grounds there were to my friends’ complaints.

I tucked my ankles around the legs of the tall chair and watched, watched the group of German men toasting twice a minute, whenever anyone around them said anything related to 1) Germany 2) Ireland 3) drinking 4) women 5) Lady Gaga. I watched how the men approaching the bar never ruffled the older “chaps” hunched in their wool. I watched a cream-skinned woman slip out of the crowd.

Bethany came back with two wine glasses about a third full of deep orange liquid, the color of a topaz necklace my aunt used to wear.

“What is it?”

“Jameson.”

“You started us off with whiskey!” putting both palms flat on the table and glaring at her.

She shrugged, raising one eyebrow at me as she lifted the glass to her lips,

“You said to get what I wanted.”
After the band stepped down for the night, we left O’Neill’s for the street corner, pausing together at the intersection of Church Lane and Suffolk Street, the gray buttresses of the church-turned-tourism-office to the left, the gold lettering of the national bank shining in the yellow street lamps to our right. I stood easy in my leather boots, sinking into one hip, feeling myself reach that optimum level of alcohol induced-confidence.

“Heyya, where’ya girls off’ta next?” Thomas, the man I’d met while buying our second round of rum, came through the doorway behind us.

“We’re not really sure yet,” I said, still looking down the street.

Bethany nodded, still appalled that most Dublin pubs closed at midnight. “Is there any place open late around here? Somewhere close?”

I mused aloud, trying to gauge the levels of closing-up of the pubs down St. Andrew’s Street. “I’ve been to Porterhouse in Temple Bar and had a good time, but I dunno.”

“Eh you don’ wanna go t’ere, no,” Thomas nodded, running his hand over his cheeks and chin. He looked me in the eye, then Bethany, “Now girls, I don’ want’ya to expect any foul play. I’m old enough to be yer fat’er an’ I’m not here for t’at, but t’ere’s a great pub jus’ up t’e street ‘ere, jus’ go up t’e street an’ turn lef’ an’ you’ll see it, i’s jus’ a little black door in t’e wall an’ it’s called t’e Secret Bar. An’ it’s free a’ deese fuckin’ touristy types, full a’ good intellectual people, students like yourselves,
an’ artists. So if you’re lookin’ for a good place head t’at way and t’ t’e left, an’ maybe I’ll see ya d’ere.”

“Wait, so it’s called the Secret Bar? It’s an actual place called the Secret Bar,” Bethany confirmed with mild skepticism.

Thomas was already nodding his head, eyes closed, “It’s a real place, jus’ down t’ere and to d’e left, jus’ pas’t’ose green awning d’ere. I gotta go meet a friend now, but maybe I’ll see ya d’ere later,” waving as he turned and headed away from us up the street.

Bethany turned to me, “Try to find the Secret Bar?”

“Scavenger hunt?” I laughed, mistrustful of Thomas’s directions, but knowing we’d find something along the way.

Bethany held her arm out, and I slid next to her, my arm around her waist, hers around my shoulders. We set off down St. Andrew’s towards the louder music and hustle coming from around the corner. Dodging the other goers-home and carriers-on in their varying stages of intoxication, walking past the shifting kaleidoscope of colorful storefronts and sifting figures, through the different pools of music spilling out of each pub—jazz, R and B, rock, trad. In my periphery I saw Bethany lift her chin a little.

“You’re cute!” she shouted back, her voice and smile oozing cheerful condescension.

“Did someone just shout at us?” I asked blandly.

“Just called us lesbians, it’s fine.”
I laughed and half shouted, as if our original assailer would hear, “At least we’re cute lesbians.”

“Yeah we are.”

A little ways later, well past the green awnings Thomas had pointed to, we stopped together at the next street corner. “About face?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m beginning to wonder if our friendly adviser was messing with us,” as she looked around.

“Or he was just confused. He did have two glasses of whiskey in the ten minutes I was chatting with him.”

“Very possible. Walk back down the way we came and if we don’t see it we’ll try something else?”

“Yup,” we pivoted and walked back, still seeing no hidden black door. We walked back past O’Neill’s and decided to head towards Dame Street, thinking that if we didn’t see anything promising, we would head to Porterhouse after all. But just as we were about to step onto the busy thoroughfare by Ulster Bank, a narrow alley opened to our left—a cobbled canyon of a street with the high buildings on either side, wide enough only for pedestrians, strung criss-cross with twinkle lights above the bustle of heads and bodies twining in and out of the pubs, the Dame Street pubs with their backdoors open to the alleyway.

“I walk here all the time,” I said as we paused at the mouth of the narrow street. “How have I never noticed this alley before?”

“Enchanted fairy land of music and alcohol?”
“Shall we?”

“We shall,” we waded into the crowd, unhooking from each other to move more easily through the press of happy twenty-somethings. The lights from the pubs, the music pounding out the open doorways, the happy shouting and laughing, all made it feel like we’d stumbled upon some hidden Carnival, that at any moment tricksters in elaborate masks could come marching from some half-hidden doorway and with a wink blow out the street lights like candles.

We half-passed a doorway spouting some preliminary chords from an electric guitar and simultaneously stepped towards the bouncer, digging for our IDs. The tall, thick-necked man waved us through, and I read the sign as we walked through the doorway—“Sweeney’s, a drinking bar with a music problem.”

I set our whiskey glasses on the bar and waited. I always end up waiting for an awkwardly long time when I order drinks. People come and go on either side, as I wonder if I’m invisible to the bartender. Often, I wait over ten minutes.

The man next to me spun a tumbler of honey colored liquid against his palm, watching me out of the corner of his eye.

“You’re American?”

I looked over and chuckled at my own inconspicuousness, “Yes,” tracing the path of the workers behind the bar, waiting.

“You’re here on holiday?”
I turned towards him. “For an internship.”

“What?” leaning closer, with his ear towards me.

“I’m here for an internship?”

He nodded and straightened. Staring down into his glass. A large man probably in his early forties, a little like a ball of white wax—soft, round, and a little melty at his edges—his button down shirt hanging un-tucked over his pants, his bald head shining the dim pub lights. He rubbed a thick palm over his scalp, then looked back at me.

“How long?”

“What?”

“How long ya here for?”

“About two months,” I shouted, leaning on the bar top with my arms crossed, trying to make it clear I hadn’t been served yet.

“An’ ya like it?”

I had to laugh at how incredibly easy that answer was, “Very much.” I tilted my head to look at him as I said it. He had pale gray eyes that smiled even when his mouth didn’t move.

“I love Ireland too,” he said as he downed the last of his whiskey. “T’e one t’ing I can’ stand about t’is country t’ough, is how we treat Bono. He’s a great musician an’ a great man ‘ose done a helluva lot for t’is country. But people here give ‘im shite! But look at all t’e money he’s brought back ‘ere, look at all t’e fame.”
“T’at e’s kep’ all fer ‘imself,” grumbled a hunched older man sitting on my other side, woolen cap on his head, hands clamped around some liquor on the rocks.

“You c’n go straight t’hell!”

“He’s just kep’it—“

“Straight to hell!”

“all up in t’e Caymans.”

“Straight to hell!” Lunging across me to wag his pointed finger at the old man with each new shout.

“Sorry miss,” as he settled back in his seat, looking proud that he’d kept his world a little more in order, “I jus’ can’ stan’ deese fuckers,” looking across to the other man as he said the last word.

I laughed and shook my head, unable to find a different response to his outburst.

“Are ya a student?”

I nodded, “studying writing.”

“Ah, you’ll want’a be an aut’or d’en. D’at’s grand. I was an actor. Course a’m too old an’ ugly to get any decent parts now, but I was quite good—ah yer grand, but anot’er of t’e same please,” as the flustered bartender came up and replaced his empty glass. I watched in amazement, wondering if I was at the bottom of an unpublished pecking order.

Then another tender—a young woman—came up and leaned on one forearm, “What c’n I get’cha?”
I panicked. Five months past twenty-one and I still had trouble ordering alcohol. “Ummm, rum?”

“Spiced or white?”

“Spiced please,” having no idea what that really meant. She nodded and waded back to the wall of bottles.

My conversation partner was eyeing me, “You’re havin’ a good time ‘ere d’en?”

I grinned, “They weren’t kidding about the pub culture. I love the atmosphere, and the music.”

He nodded, his face suddenly earnest, his gray eyes solemn and focused, “Now, I’m gonna tell ya somet’in’, ‘cause ya seem like a nice girl, nice skin, nice face, nice hair”—I froze and looked full at him levelly and earnestly, feeling suddenly like I had to live up to the compliment—“nice voice, nice eyes, so I’m gonna tell ya d’is”—he put an elbow on his knee with his open hand in front of his face—“don’t get into narcotics, alright? ‘Cause I did, right at t’e height of my career”—he clapped and sliced the top hand through the air. “An’ if I could go back and know fer absolute sure t’ey wouldn’t catch me, I’d go back an’ kill t’ose fuckers, I would. B’cause t’ey stole d’e best years of my life right from under me.”

“Eh yer full’a shite, Thomas,” the older man grumbled.

“An’ straight ta hell wit’you Jim! Straight to it!” I was amazed at how quickly he could shift from a low, even tenor to shouting.
“Anyway dear, don’ do it, it’ll ruin your smarts an’ your good looks, an’ ya don’ need it.”

“I don’t even smoke,” I said softly.

“Good, good d’en.”

The woman came up with two wine glasses of rum—not what I’d expected, but I’d take it. But before I picked them up, I turned to Thomas—“It was nice chatting with you.”

“Course, a’course. ‘ave a g’night, dear.”

I took the glasses and waded back across the bar to where Bethany sat, bright-eyed, watching the flow of the pub, a knot of men shouting and goshing at one table, a couple thinking they were invisible in a corner. As I watched her I was struck by something, something growing like sediment layers in the back of my mind. Something was opening for us here—the impossibly good news of her health, the good drinks, conversations with charming, amusing strangers. Something about this night had focused me, made me aware of how strangely enchanted the evening was, aware of all that might happen. I enjoyed the last few steps before she saw me, watching her soak in the easy companionship of the room.

Then she turned and raised her eyebrows, “That took a while, and why do they keep giving us shots in stemware?”

“I made a friend, and I have no idea,” setting both drinks on the table.

“Cheers,” she proffered her glass.
“Cheers,” I said and clinked my glass against hers, throwing back the liquid in one easy go. Surprised by the warm, almost cinnamon flavors, immediately regretting that it was gone. “There should be some traditional music getting started upstairs.”

“Upstairs it is, let’s check it out,” pounding her glass down on the table and standing from her chair.

He looked very young. Short and skinny, with dark hair cut close around his narrow oval face, the blue lights flashing from behind the still-tuning rock band made him look even paler than he already was, his eyes unusually dark for someone with such a thick Irish accent. But that also could have been the light.

“Where’r ya from?” he asked, coming up to stand next to me, still facing the band.

“Ohio!” I shouted.

His eyes got wide for a second, and I could see that they really were dark brown, almost black. Then he grinned, “Is t’at close t’ a New York?”

I shook my head and laughed, “No, not really.”

“Oh, I’ve been to New York.”

“It’s a good city,” I agreed, turning back to the band, the press of bodies turned black by the bright lights ahead. I wondered briefly if Sweeney’s had been recently remodeled, beneath the smell of seize-the-day youth sweating in the press and the heat of their fifth or sixth round, the tang of sawdust and recently mixed cement still hung
in the air. But the room had the well-used look of most pubs in this part of Dublin—wide floorboards with the stain buffed thin in the center, plaster walls painted dark with a few scratches and gouges shining white, many dents painted over. The wooden bar lay like a long-fallen tree-trunk that hadn’t shifted in decades. Homey, stable, holding happily the laughs and toasts from many years of use.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bethany come out of the bathroom and raise one eyebrow as she noticed the proximity of the young man, asking “who’s this?” in the comfortable telepathy we had developed in the past week.

I shook my head just a little—“no one”—then chuckled as the youth’s taller, stockier companion moved to initiate conversation with Bethany. He stood behind her left shoulder, still having to shout his questions to be heard over the rock music now reaching full volume. Bethany answered, her eyes still on the four musicians, even when she turned her head to better reach his ear. Then he took a step closer, and Bethany crossed the three feet to where I was standing.

“You want to get another drink?”

“Sure,” I grinned, and turned to dark-eyed boy, touching his shoulder with two fingers to get his attention.

“I’m gonna go get another drink,” I shouted, looking at him calmly, Thank you for your interest, but I’m not interested.

He nodded and turned more fully back to the band, the slight smile fading from his lips. Following Bethany back to the bar, she turned and asked me, “So what do we want?”
I shrugged, “Get what you want.”

“Whiskey!”

We came up the wide wooden staircase at O’Neill’s, standing at the edge of the already-crowded room. Everyone trying to stake a place within sight of the musicians.

The band that night was a two-man duo. A thick-chested strawberry blond, his hair cut short, just a bit of pale stubble around the edge of his jaw. He sat easy with his pale wood guitar, rolling up the cuffs of his blue shirt, unhooking the button at his neck in the heat of the pub. The other man was smaller, dark haired with steep cheekbones and very pale eyes—a flute, a bodhrán, and a violin in various cases around his feet.

“Gotta love that top button undone,” I said with intentional huskiness.

Bethany snorted then said more seriously, “He is incredibly attractive.”

“Very, though I’ve kinda got a thing for musicians,” chuckling at how generic I sounded.

“G’evenin’ everybody,” the guitarist greeted the crowd, “Nice t’see ya’ll here at O’Neill’s on a Tuesday. We should ‘ave a good set for ya t’night.”

They opened with a few tourist-pleasing classics—Rocky Road to Dublin, Wild Rover, Galway Girl—but as the night wore on and the tourists left for bed with their early trains and trips in mind, the pair settled into some originals, some instrumentals. The guitarist had a strong, homely baritone well suited for pub songs,
but for a couple of their own ballads the dark-haired violinist pulled up the mic, unfurling a husky tenor that silenced the room in seconds. Bethany bought a pint of Guinness that we passed back and forth, licking the froth from our upper lips.

“I really shouldn’t go drink for drink with you,” I joked, noticing that she hardly seemed affected after three shots and half a pint, while a slight weightless feeling had set into my legs and forearms. She smiled but didn’t take her eyes off the band, her green eyes wide, her mouth slightly open. I could feel her foot tapping under the table.

“Alright we ‘ave just a couple more songs for ya t’night,” said the guitarist, “An’ we’ll make’em good ones.” He’d barely finished the word when the violinist launched into a whirling reel. Fists, palms and feet slapping thighs, tabletops and floorboards by the beginning of the second bar.

“We’re gonna dance, you ready?” I shouted to Bethany as I grabbed her elbow, feeling bold, the night unleashing me to things I wouldn’t normally do even while I was drunk. I pulled her out into the four-foot square of space between the tables and the bar. We wrapped our arms around each other’s shoulders and waists, spinning to the fiddle and guitar and whoops around us.

“T’ere ya go!” someone shouted, as the musicians hit the next set of phrasing, the tempo shifting up just a little. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a couple young women—Londoners by their accents—standing to join us. Bethany and I stepped from each other and linked hands with them, spinning, stamping, clapping,
kicking. We didn’t return to our chairs until the musicians stood from theirs and bid us goodnight.

“I really shouldn’t go drink for drink with you,” I said again after we’d left our young admirers for the relative quiet of Sweeney’s lounge area. With deep, darted leather couches lining the walls, tucked into the bay windows, we’d sunk happily back against the upholstery, sipping our Jameson on the rocks. I’d been right about the remodeling. In the corner opposite us was a mess of plywood and fresh-cut lumber, a couple plastic buckets crusted with dried plaster. Bethany crossed her ankles on the coffee table.

“Yeah, I’m not even really that drunk still,” she said. “I can convince myself that I am, but I have an insane tolerance for alcohol, sort of a frightening tolerance actually.”

“It’s partially genetics isn’t it?”

“Oh yeah, my whole family is that way,” she nodded.

“You come by it honestly.”

I rolled the whiskey against the back of my teeth, letting it slip down my throat a little at a time to better savor the warmth. Every nerve ending of my body seemed satisfied. Our scuffed boots on the coffee table, our long jean-sheathed legs side by side, the stained-glass windows in blue and yellow arcs, the silhouetted figures moving back and forth in front of them—a fill-me-to-the-brim view. Made impossibly
better by the comfort of the deep couches, by sitting close with one arm around the other’s shoulders, the contrastive cold of the glass tumblers in our free hands, the electric guitar notes swelling and ebbing as the band played, tuned, played again. Their songs hammered through with snare and cymbal hits.

“I’m guessing it was an older building that’s been repurposed,” I mused, looking at the windows and the surrounding stonework, “Wonder what it was before.”

“I dunno.”

We sat quietly for a while, soaking. Letting the synapses in our brains slow and calm in the semi-darkness of the bar. I shifted a little closer, and maybe she laid her head on my shoulder, but I might be making that up.

I tightened my arm around her until we were almost facing each other, our cheeks side by side, looking over the other’s shoulder.

“Okay, I’m asking permission to kiss you,” I said quietly, looking down at the cross-grain pattern in her shirt. I thought I felt her deflate a little, or maybe I imagined it.

“I’m dating James, and I don’t need to complicate two relationships.” But she stayed for a moment with her cheek near the corner of my neck, then, lifting her head and kissing me once where my collar exposed a little bit of shoulder skin, then kissed me again. I held on for a second, wondering, but then let go, settling back into the black leather, my forearm still touching hers.

I was immediately annoyed when I felt tears glazing my eyes. I worried that Bethany would see. But I couldn’t deny the hollow sadness in my stomach. Not at the
gentle rebuff, most of me had expected it, but because some part of me wanted this feeling—this closeness of drinks and dancing and easy telepathy—to last beyond the welcome phone call and the celebration, beyond this night of pubs and music and cameo characters, beyond the reel at O’Neill’s, this couch in Sweeney’s. Somehow in my mind, that kiss became the way make it happen, the way to make sure we could stay like this. Somehow, I knew, it was slipping through my fingers.

8

We left Sweeney’s for home soon after, walking through the now quiet and dark Dublin streets. I led us down the routes I’d learned so well over the past couple months. We made it to Grafton, a stretch of yellow-lit cobbles. Rickshaw drivers standing and chatting from their bike seats, intoxicated goers-home leaning on each other as they lurched along. We joined the swaying, stop and start flow towards the tram station, but didn’t make it past the McDonalds.

I put a hand out to stop Bethany, and we both looked into the bright, florescent white space of the still-open restaurant.

“Do you want ice cream?” Bethany asked, head tilted. “Cause I could go for some ice cream.”

“Yes!” I grabbed her arm, hauling both of us into the line of late night snackers, becoming very aware that I was very drunk by the eyes that glanced—or that I imagined glanced—at the two loud American girls.

“Two chocolate sundaes please.”
“I feel like I should be upset about how unhealthy I’m being tonight,” Bethany laughed as the worker handed us our sundaes and we turned to leave, chuckling through mouthfuls of ice cream and syrup. “But given the circumstances I think this is allowed. In fact, I’d say this is absolutely necessary.”

“I’d say so,” I agreed.

Back out onto the dim street, the cloudy sky glowing reddish from the city’s light noise, a young man with a guitar sat on an old crate and let out a few opening chords. A couple friends standing or sitting around him. A blond girl at his shoulder.

It was Bethany’s turn to put out a hand so that we both stopped dead.

“Okay, so I love this song,” staring straight ahead at the guitarist.

“Really?” I asked, not expecting the preference given her taste for Stravinsky.

She nodded. “What’s it called? ‘Run’ I think, but what’s the band name?”

“Oh it’s the same one that does the ‘if I lay here’ song, what is it. Ummm, ‘Chasing Cars’ is that song.”

“Is it?”

“I’m pretty sure. The band is—“ I bent my chin to my chest, “Snow Patrol!”

“That’s it.”

I immediately sank to the street, sitting cross-legged, still shoveling ice cream into my mouth, my eyes on the musician as he made a few tuning adjustments.

“Okay,” Bethany laughed, sitting down next to me.

The young man gave a last twist to his lower E flat knob, adjusted the capo, and ran his fingers through the first few strums.
“Can I just point out that we’re in Ireland right now?” Bethany said.

“Two happy, drunk American girls eating ice cream, sitting in the middle of Grafton Street, listening to a street musician play Snow Patrol in Dublin, Ireland,” I corrected. I leaned my head on her shoulder, or maybe she leaned hers on mine, and the hollowness came back to my stomach. We would only sit here like this through the song, I knew. The opening verse started—I’ll sing it one last time for you, then we really have to go . . .

Five days later we were on a train, heading back to Dublin after a cycling trip in Kerry, Bethany’s last day in Ireland. She sat checking a few emails, writing some notes to herself on her laptop while I journalled, trying to record the weekend of sea cliffs and wonderful fish dinners, then writing down everything I remembered about our Tuesday night pub run.

I looked up sharply, “I just remembered that I got really upset when we were sitting in Grafton Street.” I remembered shutting my eyes hard against tears, my shoulders rising with one deep, accepting sigh.

“Yeah, I cried,” Bethany said looking at me, her green eyes very frank, as if she’d already remembered what I was just realizing. Maybe she’d already put some thought into this.

“Yes, I remember the look on your face!” I said, a snapshot of her curved jawbone and wispy curls against the yellow streetlight, the dimness making her irises
dark, even though her eyes had a bright sheen of tears. “Do you remember why?” my brow furrowed. “I have absolutely no idea.”

“It was something about the look on your face,” she said.

I panicked, thinking that she meant I had made her upset in some way. “You mean the look on my face like I was angry with you or something—“

“No, no,” she paused and restarted the sentence, her lips pursed, “something about the understanding in your expression, the empathy or something.”

I nodded and exhaled, relieved. Then leaned into the chair back, watching the orange-tinted pastures skim by as the sunset tipped its light across the landscape. “I have absolutely no idea,” I repeated. “I have no idea what we were talking about. I’d give big money to know.”

The singer was into the second verse—makes it so hard not to cry, as we say our long goodbyes, I nearly do. Bethany and I had been having a quiet conversation underneath the volume of his song, trading sentences without taking our eyes off the young man’s fingers as he shaped the chords on the fret board.

An important sentence built up in my chest, and I remember letting it out like a gasp, quick and quickly tailing off at the end, the last word barely made it out before I shut my eyes hard and tucked my chin, down to my chest, my shoulders curving over after. My upper back lifted and lowered with one deep breath as Bethany put her hand on my shoulder, shook me a little.
I opened my eyes before I lifted my head again. As I straightened and looked her in the face she said something. A sentence that matched mine, I remember, but which had nothing to do with me, just as mine had had nothing to do with her. Because of the lamp over her left shoulder, her green eyes looked black, but the blackness made the water at the corners of her lashes more visible. I remember that she didn’t blink away tears the way most people do, just let them sit there in her eyes. I tilted so that our shoulders were touching. The song was ending—*Have heart, my dear. We’re bound to be afraid*—and I felt myself still even deeper, not moving, a stillness that reached all the way down into the pit of my stomach—*Even if you cannot hear my voice, I’ll be right beside you dear*, the last line that the singer left hanging *a cappella*, his guitar still humming with the last chord, his listeners still silent in the absolute hush before quiet gets too deep and the audience applauds.

“Ready,” Bethany asked.

“Ready,” I said, even though I was pretty sure I wasn’t, at least part of me wasn’t.

We braced our hands against our knees and stood, heading up Grafton to the tram station.
What They’ve Made Us

Sara curled on her bunk, watching the riot policeman toss his water bottle. She pressed her cheek against the hostel window, looking down the brick alley at the burly man doubled in size by bullet-proofing—black straps, heavy black fatigues, plates on his chest, shoulders, thighs. He casually flipped his Buxton bottle four feet over his head before catching it right handed, sending it air born again. Chatting and laughing with his comrades who stood in easy, low-slung stances or sat on the bumper of the armored jeep, soaking up the morning sunlight slanting over the southern roofs. We could see the depth of their belly laughter even through their armor.

“It’s just so funny to me,” Sara said as I finished shoving wallet, phone and passport into my purse. I nodded and bent so she wouldn’t see my amused expression. I had become strangely accustomed to armored vehicles and soldiers during my summer in Israel two years earlier. The policeman with his baton and riot shield seemed tame compared to the four-foot rifles I’d seen walking through Tel Aviv. Israeli soldiers had ridden the bus to the market with me. They’d bought figs and apricots next to me at my favorite fruit vendor. They’d strolled down the boardwalk in their olive green fatigues as I took my first tottering steps into the Mediterranean. I was accustomed to the sight of violence-ready people doing normal-people things. As my younger sister, Sara had obviously heard the stories, but she hadn’t seen it. The incongruity struck her fresh.
I reached around to the back of my neck and unhooked the chain there, “I thought it was hilarious when I said I’d have to take off my cross, and Darragh said both sides wore crosses. Obviously. They’re Protestant.”

“I know,” Sara laughed, still watching the policeman, “Your cross has a pretty distinct look.”


I brought the ends together and re-hooked them, stowing the Celtic cross under my pillow. The last time I’d taken it off avoid attention, I was landing in Ben Gurion Airport, hoping to look as generically American as possible as I went through the tight Israeli security, pretending to be a tourist with no steak in the country’s religious divisions. I patted the pillow a little nervously, knowing the pendant wasn’t valuable enough to steal, but feeling anxious anyway. I straightened.

As if she’d read my mind, or maybe a readiness in my still stance, Sara left the window and swung her legs over the mattress, checked the state of her dark braid in the mirror. As she stood, she glanced at my unusually bare collarbone, “No reason to risk it.”

I shrugged, “I’ll be less self conscious this way.”

“People probably wouldn’t notice.”

“Probably.”

She followed me out the door of our room and down the hostel steps, past the policemen to York Street, the parade route on the Twelfth of July, Belfast, Northern Ireland.
The streets were mostly empty yet—hot dog and ice cream stands setting up in the side alleys off the parade route, a couple families staking claims with lawn chairs and coolers, a few men with 8:00 AM beers already in their hands, their shirts already off in the bright morning heat, tattoos a little stretched and faded under their chest hair.

As we walked we passed more check points with jeeps and black-armored men. Just past St. Anne’s Cathedral, a policewoman with her auburn hair back in a tight ponytail trotted over to us from the other side of the street—“Excuse me, where are you going?”

Sara and I glanced at each other, and she withdrew ever-so-slightly behind my narrow shoulders. “We were just walking,” I said, glad that my accent delineated me as a non-combatant observer.

“Well it’s just that this is a quarantine area, you understand?” looking at me sternly, trying to categorize me as either oblivious to the day or careless of what that meant. I wavered a bit.

“Of course,” I said.

“Where are you girls staying?”

“The Linen House Hostel on Library Street.”

She nodded and turned away, “Alright,” taking a few steps back towards the other policemen—“Just take care now girls”—she called over her left shoulder without breaking stride.
Sara and I turned back down the street, “Should we go back to the hostel?” Sara asked.

I squinted, thinking, “No, not much point. I have a feeling things are going to get started here pretty soon.”

The black taxi picked us up around 2:00 in the afternoon, the round-fendered, glossy cab chugging down the little side street between the library and the old linen factory. Our driver was a short, thin-faced man with wide brown eyes and expressive hands, a bit of brown hair going white and gray around his ears. “G’afternoon to ya’ girls,” he greeted, opening the door and ushering us in, “in ya’ go, in ya’ go, we don’t ‘ave much time. Not t’day we don’t.” He shut the door behind us and walked around to the front. I noticed Sara staring around the interior of the British style cab—“I love that it’s actually built to be a taxi,” she whispered, noting the design of the door, floor and seat. “It makes so much sense.”

The driver had the key in the ignition, “Now we’re off!” He backed the little cab around and headed up the street, “Now girls, I’m Kevin, an’ who are you?”

“Annie,” I said.

“And Sara.”

“Sara! That’s my little girl’s name, though I guess she’s older than ya now. How d’ya spell it, Sara? With an h”—he pronounced it ‘h-ai-ch’—“or without?”

“Without,” Sara grinned.
“Really? Good, good, that’s how my girl spells it to, because it’s short fer Saraid,” pronounced sir-ay, “an’ that’s Gaelic, so we spell it without the h. A good Gaelic name ya ‘ave den, in a manner. An’ what’s Annie? Hebrew I’d guess, good, good.” He took us down Carrick Hill Road, the churches and steep-roofed houses and little garden walls all in brick. I was amazed by how similar it looked to Dublin—winding streets, brick buildings, terraced houses and little front gardens—but how dissimilar it felt. Belfast kept itself closer to the ground. No tall Georgian lines, no brightly colored doors, no venerable sycamore trees. The city lay in a strange jumble of trimmed old houses and boxy new buildings, four-lane streets that never seemed to have many cars on them, a sudden scaly spread of a parking lot fenced with chain-link, the rowed car tops glinting in the sun. I stared hard out the window, searching, disquieted, longing for Dublin even as I tried to love her conflicted stepsister, tried to love Belfast even in its troubles, the way I had loved the Palestinian neighborhoods of Nazareth and East Jerusalem. I preferred Dublin’s order and elegance, its bustle and cheerfulness. I felt guilty for it.

As we drove Kevin continued his little ramblings, gesticulating with his right hand off the steering wheel, fluttering and pushing the air with his fingers, making the dark wood rosary on the rearview mirror swing—“Now girls, we’re gonna drive a bit, an den I’ll stop an’ explain some t’ings to ya, and den we’ll go’n see t’e walls. Now I can’t take ya all de places I normally would cause of t’e day. Ya both know t’e day? Of course well, so”—his phone vibrated in the cup holder—“ah wait—Yes? Teddy? Yes, well no, we’re already about ‘alf way done. No, no, we’ll be fine now, don’t
worry ‘bout us, we’ll be out in time. No! Now don’t ya worry you’re old head, ya great oaf.” He pressed his cell phone closed.

“Sorry girls, dat was my boss, Teddy. It’s jus’ I c’n talk to ‘im like t’at because we’ve been mates for t’irty years an’ more. An’ don’t think we’re already ‘alf way done. No, no, don’t worry. We’re jus’ gettin’ started, but I ‘ad to tell ‘im dat because ‘e’s worried we won’t be done before t’e trouble starts, or d’at t’e gates will close an’ we’ll be stuck on t’e wrong side. But we’ll be fine, he just doesn’t need t’ worry. But yer safe wit’ me girls, ya are.”

He turned into a little parking lot and climbed out of the driver’s seat, coming around to sit in the back of the cab facing us, “Now girls, I’ve got t’ask? Are ya’s Democrats or Republicans?”

“Democrats,” we said in sisterly unison.

“Dat’s good, dat’s goods, we like Obama here. None’a dat George Bush craziness. Dat’s good, yer grand.” He paused and sat forward, his head thrust towards us, forearms on his knees, his ever-expressive right hand chopping the air, “Girls, are ya religious? What are ya? Protestant, Catholic?” He made the last word three syllables—Cath-o-lic.

“Ha, if you were just wearing your cross, Anne. We’re Catholic,” Sara laughed.

Kevin slapped his knees with both hands, “Awww, I knew I liked you girls. Now, let’s get to it. I can tell ya better now’s I know.”
After the policewoman turned us back towards York Street, we didn’t have to wait long for the deep rumbles of the bass drums to expand up the asphalt, stirring up the crowds as the sound travelled. The sidewalks pressed with rows and rows of families and children at the front, teenagers and knots of twenty-something behind, old men on the building steps in the shade. It could have been the Fourth of July—a set of little girls had matching red, white and blue dresses, carefully washed, ironed and starched. Another pair had orange carnations in the ponytails and white buckle shoes—brand new by their immaculate state of scuff-less-ness.

A little tow-headed boy—not older than three—had his own tiny snare drum that he kept rapping on, raising his little knees as he marched in a circle—“Companeeheehalt!”—he shouted without knowing it was two words but knowing he was supposed to hold out that vowel in the middle. His mother clapped and pointed him out to the other women.

When the first fife and drum corps rounded the corner, I half expected Look Away Dixieland or America the Beautiful to fill the brick-canyon street. I was so immersed in the July-heat, red-white-and-blue patriotism. Instead, unfamiliar melodies above the tramp of many feet, rows and rows, long stretching lines—grandfathers, fathers, sons, grandsons aged four to eighty-five, all smart uniforms with purple sashes and orange flowers in their shirtfronts. Old fashioned snare drums swinging from the hips of hearty young men. Older men with fingers lifting and lowering in unison over their piccolos. Boys with flags and banners—“The Red Hand
“William of Orange,” “Old Boyne Island Heroes!” And in the center of every orderly grid, a tall and burly man contorting inhumanly around a beset bass drum, the instrument swinging wildly back and forth, the player’s stance wide in order to offset the drum’s swaying weight. Sailor-worthy tattoos bulged with his biceps as he brought down the mallets harder and harder, the drumheads visibly quivering under the strokes.

With each new corps the crowd roared, roared for the most popular tunes, the most animated bass drummer, the tightest marching. Roared for family men marching four generations deep, men who broke step to wave, shout a greeting, pat the heads of daughters and sons—“The great marching heritage of the Belfast Orange Orders!” crowed someone with a loudspeaker.

“There are so many,” Sara wondered, looking down the street at the never-ending rows. “They just keep coming.”

I nodded, “I keep trying to gauge how much of this is good, clean family fun, and how much of this is something else,” my brow furrowed as I watched the marchers.

“I think this is mostly clean,” Sara said, shrugging and watching the little drummer boy marching in his circles, “At least at this point.”

But it was just that little boy with his drum that bothered me, the three-year-old who would become a four-year-old holding a banner tassel in the parade with his brothers. Then a snare drummer marching with this father, then maybe a bass drummer beating out those booming and erratic pulses. The older gents—the ones
who would remember the Troubles of the 1970s, who would remember the hunger
strikes, the three-day gun battle at Falls Road, the twenty-two bombs of Bloody
Friday—those men marched with stern precision, fully aware, bookended by the
demands of their inheritance and the imperative of their legacy. From their ranks the
unionist paramilitaries had drawn their fighting force. From among them the
Protestant newspapers counted and mourned their dead.

The little boy with his drum was breathing it, imitating Gran’da and his stiff
marching style. I couldn’t help but see negative potential there. I couldn’t help but
see danger: in his innocent totterings, in the aggressive pounding of the drummers, in
the crushed beer cans piling up in the gutters. I knew that I was biased, but I swore the
energy of the crowd was shifting—“Companeeeeehalt!”

After our taxi tour, Sara and I stayed inside through the late afternoon. The
carnival atmosphere, the street vendors shouting, the patriotism oozing out of every
sweaty-with-beer-can-in-July body—all of it left with the marchers into the outer
Belfast neighborhoods. Now reports of police barricades, airborne bricks, water
cannons and rubber bullets filtered out of the Irish-Catholic areas, places where police
were trying to turn the marchers away. Everyone in our hostel, tucked at the edge of
the city center within sight of the peace walls, ate their simple traveller dinners of rice,
pasta and beans, all eyes glued to the small television set in the corner of the dining
room, watching through the wires the clashes that were unfolding less than two miles from our soup bowls and salad forks.

No one spoke, sidestepping the unknown opinions and allegiances scattered through the room. Until a trio of young American women came sweeping in—three bottles of vodka, one gin, and one rum clinking as they set down their shopping bags—“Well, if no one else in this place is going to have a good time, at least we should. I mean what the fuck? In Belfast for two fucking days and we can’t even go out. They should just put it all behind them, fucking past. Terrorism is just wrong anyway.”

I shifted and met Sara’s eyes across the table, her face dark and guarded, eyebrows raised. I tilted my head in agreement. We felt the tenor of the room shift, a silent animosity towards the loud gaggle of brunettes. Sara and I didn’t talk for the rest of the meal, our nationality suddenly secret and our accent a liability of association in a tense room looking for its breaking point. The girls continued to babble—

“I mean, what the hell do they think this is going to do to their tourism industry anyway? City doesn’t look like it’s doing so hot to begin with.”

I turned to look incredulously over my shoulder, unable to help it. Sara lowered her chin at me in silent warning—*keep your head down, don’t get involved.*

“Wealth is not the most important thing for everyone,” a middle-aged French woman chided kindly, her gray-and-chocolate hair pulled up into a bun on the back of her head.
The young woman scoffed and sat down with her two companions, pouring each other glasses of cherry vodka. They conversed quietly—low, aggravated tones slowly soothing into higher, laugh-punctuated storytelling. I turned back to the television with the rest of the room: black-dressed policemen with riot shields, crowds of young men throwing stones and bottles, glass shattering on the tops of the armored cars—At least four police officers have been injured in the clashes between loyalists and law enforcement. This could be a particularly long night.

As soon as I scraped the last of my rice soup from the bowl, Sara and I rose and quietly carried our dishes to the kitchen.

While he sat with us in the cab back, Kevin told us a little about history but mostly about the present—“Now girls, you’ve got to understand, yes you’ve got to. I’m pro-Ireland, anti-British. I’m pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli. I’m pro-Basque, anti-Spain. I’m pro-Cuba, anti-American,” then glanced up at us with a ‘beggin-your-pardon’ look in his eyes. “But you see, I’m not pro or anti anyone. I’m just against governments doin’ this shite to people, you understand?”

I nodded, wondering that the only place on that list I hadn’t been was Cuba. Sara nodded too, looking at our driver with the same intent, discerning seriousness she’s carried with her from infancy. He went on—

“As I ‘ave friends over t’ere, on t’e ot’er side, good lifelong mates, an’ I wouldn’t give’em up. Not fer d’world I wouldn’t. It’s jus’ now, these few weeks as I
can’ stand’em. Just like they feel about me around St. Patricks. An when we have
d’at t’ey all go” he bit the second knuckle of his index finger, closing his eyes and
rocking a bit. “An’ when dey ‘ave d’is shite we all go,” he made the same motion.
“But we bear all dey’re shite, and St. Patrick’s just a festival, jus’ a festival for the
little ones and a few pints for t’e parents. Just a festival. But t’is marchin’. T’is is
somet’in else.”

He kept circling between bias and shared fault as he drove us around the
murals—“I mean, it’s jus’ t’e assholes are the problem. We’ve got our assholes
over’ere, an’ t’ey’ve got assholes over dere. But t’ey’ve got bigger assholes.”

He took us into the Shankhill area, a Protestant neighborhood, to show us the
remains of a bonfire that had burned throughout the previous night. Smoke still
whispered from the charred wood planks, waves of heat distorting the tight-packed
homes behind, making the blue sky quiver.

We stood on the sidewalk, smelling the old blaze. “Now take a look at t’is
girls, and as you’re Catholic, you’ll understand”—he pulled his smart phone out of his
pocket, pulling up a picture and zooming in. “I took t’is yesterday on a tour an’ look,
look what’s in t’e center dere.”

Sara and I peered at the blurry photograph. By the background and the angle,
it was taken from exactly where we were standing. The fodder for the bonfire was
shipping pallets stacked thirty feet high and in the center, propped on the tower, was a
little white figure about a foot tall.

“It’s Mary,” I said.

Sara and I didn’t have a response beyond shrugs and wagging heads. I picked at the empty skin over my collarbone.

Sara set the steaming bowl of rice in front of me, lunch.

“Thanks,” I said, guilty again that she had done most of the cooking, but I had chopped vegetables, and she was a better cook than I was, and I would do dishes.

I pushed my notebook and pen aside, digging into the hearty soup she’d somehow scrapped together from our meager groceries. A TV set was on in the corner, discussing the routes of the Orange Day marches, how the routes had been altered from last year to prevent clashes between loyalists and republicans, what pressure points might still be a problem, quotes promoting either peace or underhandedly encouraging action from Sinn Fein and Orange Order leaders, everything stilted with the careful wording and emotionless faces of subtext and politics. No neutral parties, not today.

When I looked away from the screen, Sara was smiling quietly to herself, her dark eyes glittering, her lips pursed with irony.

“What?” I chuckled.
“Oh there were two women cooking in the kitchen with me. One was I think French, the other was from that big family here from Korea. The Korean woman was talking about how she wanted to go to America on her next trip. The French woman said that America was a nice place to visit, and the Korean woman said, ‘I’ve heard that America is a wonderful place except it’s full of Americans’.”

I snorted, both at the irony of the statement and its regrettable alignment with American stereotypes.

Sara continued, “So I started laughing and they both looked at me”—she widened her eyes in shock and embarrassment to imitate the two women—“and asked where I was from. ‘The States,’ I told them”—as she shrugged and laughed. “They both started apologizing and I was like, ‘No it’s fine. I think it’s funny.’”

“And in some ways they’re not wrong,” I agreed, amused but slightly frustrated by the assumptions that had travelled in front of me for the last three summers.

Sara just laughed, “Nope, they’re not wrong. Americans are weird.”

We both returned to our food, ears on the newscast but most of our attention on the warm rice filling our empty stomachs. Done within minutes, I took our dishes into the kitchen while she opened her laptop to answer emails and messages from friends. When I came back she had turned back to the television—Rulings by the Parades Commission to not allow marching through the Catholic neighborhoods of Woodvale and Ardoyle have led to anger amidst the Protestant community and warnings from Loyalist leaders.
“You’re phone buzzed,” she said, pushing it across the table to me.

I took it and opened a text from Darragh, “How’s Belfast? Seen any burnt popes yet?”

I reported back a negative on papal effigies and turned to Sara, “Want to see if we can do the black taxi tour this afternoon.”

“Sure,” she said, without looking away from the television, but she followed me as I went to the lobby to make the arrangements.

“What a day to do it,” I heard her murmur.

Driving down along the walls we stopped at a small memorial, a brick patio with a granite Celtic Cross, four feet tall, polished as a new grave stone and covered in names. The neighborhood’s dead, lost to the Troubles.

“Now each neighborhood on dis side ‘as one a deese memorials. An ya see, ya see how our houses are backed right against t’er wall. D’ey chose where t’er walls were built, d’ey built ‘em up, t’ough we wanted’em too. So our houses are right up against t’er walls, an’ d’ey’ve got a good wide road between t’er wall and dere houses. But we’re so close t’at sometimes t’erir boys t’row bottles and stones over into our back gardens, an so we’ve ‘ad to live in cages, ya see”—he opened his arms to encompass the houses on either side of the memorial. The short, one-story structures had little five foot walls connecting the back of each house to the partition wall behind, and
mortared into those walls were big, slant-roofed cages of heavy, interlocking metal rods. Each brick house had a little metal house behind.

“Of course our children climb on’em like monkeys, but d’at’s children, and da’t’s what t’ey’ve made us into, t’ose assholes. We’re jus’ livin’ like monkeys.”

I could see Sara’s eyes go wide as she stared through the back gardens, the heavy metal structures receding in either direction like reflections in opposing mirrors. As we walked back to the car, her head was down, thinking hard, processing all this strangeness she had not experienced in her twenty, small-town-Ohio years. I wanted to hug her, but I didn’t want to seem condescending. She deserved the chance to think on her own.

After we left the memorial, Kevin drove us to the opposite side of the wall, the two-lane road between the tall concrete and the Protestant homes. I shook my head, feeling a familiar old ember smolder in my gut, angry and tired, exhausted from breathing in partition and conflict in Palestine, the Basque country, Belfast. I wished I was home, and not even in Dublin, Dublin was too involved, back in Ohio, back in the woods and little, flower-basket main street.

We parked and got out of the cab, Kevin handing each of us a black sharpie, “Now girls, Obama signed dis section of t’e wall not too far back, an’ if it’s good enough for t’e President of t’e United States, it’s good enough for my girls. Now you t’ink about it, an write whatever you like” smiling at both of us, then stepping away.

Sara and I both wished for peace of course, signed and dated, but so did every other name, day, month and year, stretching for twenty yards on either side.
The conflicts between police and the marchers continued well into the evening, though we never saw any of it. Sara and I left the hostel at around 8:00 in the evening, the sun barely beginning to set, the sky clear. Stained napkins and newspaper pages blew down the streets empty of parades and spectators and children wearing Union Jacks, wearing Queen Elizabeth faces with the eyes cut out. We walked through the eerie quiet, our happiness at being freed from the hostel slowly sinking into unease at the un-city-like silence. We had been eager to experience Belfast pub life: try a Protestant pub, try a Catholic one, compare notes, pretend to be experts. But as we walked the streets—stained from food and drink spills of the day, tossing with paper tumbleweeds, ringing with the sudden footfalls of a solitary man hurrying down the sidewalk, face low and hidden by his hat brim—the silence felt like a cold sweat. It told us everyone was somewhere else.

The streets stood deep in shadow, making the red brick look ashen, making the air seem cold even though the night was warm. We hurried down the streets, looking for signs of life, looking for a diversion from the tense atmosphere of the hostel. But the shops were boarded, locked and dark, the pub doors shut with the blinds drawn. The city sank quiet, a couple pigeons hobbling after flattened hot dog bits, a smear of ketchup. A paper cup ticking as it was blown from the sidewalk to the street. We stopped at a convenience store, the only place with its lights on in the whole central city it seemed. Entering on quiet feet, feeling like we shouldn’t be there, the man
behind the counter looked simultaneously tense and bored, the muscles of his shoulders tight, his eyes vacant, his left hand slack, his right balled in a fist.

A few other people bought milk and bread, a pack of cigarettes. Sara and I bought a jar of Nutella to cheer us up. I pushed for ice cream but Sara held firm—“We’re travelling again the day after tomorrow, and this won’t melt.”

I nodded, took the jar to the counter and handed over a couple pounds. We left the store and walked straight back to the hostel, shocked by the sudden noise of the common room, by sounds of sirens and gunfire coming from the dining room.
Thrumming with the ship when the big engines started, churning, I watched the white buoys and cracked pilings of Holyhead harbor vibrate in the windowpane, then slide away, the way I imagine an avalanche starting. A shudder, then slow acceleration. Shift then fall. My left fist tightened in my lap. Adrenaline burned a faint bitterness on the back of my tongue. The *Ulysses* pulled out of port.

I waited a moment, caught by the steady glide of gray ocean past the thick glass, the constricted view of the wharf opening into the wider bay, then wider water, framed by the rounded rectangle cut from the ship’s side. Such a small window, like looking at a ballroom through a keyhole.

I stood and wandered up the ship, ascending staircases and looking for open air, a forward view of the blank slate waters, an awareness of the shrinking town and streets and steeples behind me—*And this world is fading away, along with everything it craves, 1 John 2:17*. But I topped one set of steps and found only smart-suited men drinking whiskey from thick tumblers, waiters in starched white. I climbed another and found stretching aisles of white-washed port doors to private rooms. Returning to the passenger deck, I balanced in my chair and waited, peering at the last bit of Welsh headland slipping past, watching it give way to miles and miles of water.

Now it’s high watermark
Three years earlier, in Israel, a friend and I walked down the beach in Tel Aviv, the long four miles of sand and boardwalk extending from Ramat Aviv to Old Yafo. Maggie tilted her head in the wind, letting the air pick locks of thick hair from her cheeks. I pressed my soles against the cool sand, feeling grains tingle against my arches. We looked out over the Mediterranean, watching the white wave tips march in from the flat black sea indistinguishable from the flat black sky. We watched the symmetrical airplane lights angle in over the city, heading for the runway.

“I’m so terrified when I look at the ocean at night,” Maggie said to me. “I almost can’t look out there I get so scared,” glancing out past the waves then back towards the electric-lit city. “I’ve heard stories of air force pilots crashing into the ocean because they couldn’t tell where the water started and the sky stopped. Just big black emptiness.”

“It is scary. The hugeness of the ocean is always scary,” I agreed looking seaward, inhaling slowly as if trying to fill my lungs with the blackness in front of me, trying to smell it, savoring the slow terror building up behind my breastbone, the feeling that I might start screaming at any second. That wonderful razor-edge of awe—dead center between awesome and awful. “It’d be so much worse,” I almost said ‘better’ but caught myself, “if we were on a boat though.”
“No way,” Maggie said shaking her blond head, her blue eyes crystalizing into hard fractures. “When you’re on a boat, actually out there, you can’t even think about it. It’s too terrifying so you just have to shut it out and pretend it’s not there.”

I snorted. The response seemed so indicative of her. I insisted, “I think it’d be way scarier to be on a boat, have all those miles and miles of water underneath you.”

“Annie!” Maggie scolded, “You’ve never been on a boat on the ocean. When I was in the Galapagos, I had to focus only on the ship and on the people, and the sky. Otherwise I would have gone insane.” She gathered her hair in her hands and twisted it over one shoulder, closing her eyes, nodding with downturned lips.

“Okay, Mags,” I said, sensing that she was stepping up to the line and digging in her toes. I wanted to ask her what the fear meant for her. Did she see that emptiness as absence? Absence of self? Absence of God? What was the fear so big it had to be suppressed? I wanted to ask, but was afraid of she wouldn’t want her fear out in the open. She might not want to make it real that way.

We continued south along the white strip of sand, talking about college and mutual acquaintances. I nodded, and smiled and participated, but always with one eye still on the invisible horizon, with one foot in the surf, feeling it rip the grains from under me as the cold pressed up around my ankle then slithered away. I wanted to be out on it. Out on the eggshell deck of a ship above the unlit depth. I craved that near unhinging, the face-to-face with nothing, the confrontation with that hem-less dark on its own terms, the feeling in my chest, out of sight of land.
Strange, it is a huge nothing that we fear.

- Seamus Heaney

Twenty minutes out, the captain announced that, smokers were welcome please to utilize the shelters on deck, up the Ruby Staircase. The lounge at the top of the Diamond Staircase was please reserved for first class passengers. So I found a man with his pack of “flags” and followed him to the red-carpeted stairs, up to the five-inch-thick door, the white deck, white curved rails, the wet pulse of slanted blades moving a tonnage worth of water. But we slid so smooth, I felt like I was on an electric train rather than a blue water boat. And to my great disappointment, the weathered lump of Holyhead was still as wide as my upheld forearm, nowhere near the horizon, shrinking painfully slowly. I returned below decks, wanting the full impact when I saw that compass-drawn horizon—eleven miles out, the flattest empty circle implying the greatest depth.

The grey winds, the cold winds are blowing

Where I go.

I hear the noise of many waters

Far below.

- James Joyce
The deepest point in the Atlantic Ocean is the Milwaukee Deep, part of the ocean trench that stretches between the tectonic plates holding the Caribbean on the south side and North America opposite. They slide past each other and between their grating ribs a gash opens up, the second deepest place on earth, 28,373 feet below the surface, the cruising height of a commercial jet. So far that if you fell, it would take you at least forty seconds to hit the ground. The average human thinks a complete thought every 1.2 seconds. If I fell the height of Milwaukee Deep, that’s thirty-three thoughts. I could recite a Seamus Heaney poem to myself.

Green, swift upsurges, North Atlantic flux

Conjured by that strong gale-warning voice

Collapse into a sibilant penumbra

Midnight and closedown. Sirens of the tundra

- Seamus Heaney

Three weeks earlier Darragh and I drove up to Bray, a little resort town just around the lip of Dublin harbor, hidden from the gantries and the tankers. We walked the sea wall throwing its arm around the belly of smooth water where the sailboats stood still as graves. I leaned over the wall, laying my entire torso across the buff stones to see the waves press veined blue hands up the sheer blocks, rushing and
sighing. My feet dangled four inches off the walkway. I asked, “Did I tell you about the first time I saw the ocean?”

Darragh was also looking at the waves, just leaning slightly with his forearms on the rock. He stood a little straighter when I asked, looking over at me, anticipating a story, “No.”

“Hmm, somehow I thought I did. When I was sixteen—“ I stopped when I saw him pull away from the wall, staring at me with one hand still on the stone, his eyelids pulled back.

“You didn’t see t’ocean until you were sixteen?”

“I live nine hours away from the coast.”

“I can’t imagine. I jus’ can’t imagine t’at,” turning back to the machete-cut line between rose-gold sky and thunderhead ocean, the copper light glancing through his blue irises. “An’ did you go down for holiday or somet’in’?”

“Yeah to North Carolina, to the outer banks—the Milwaukee Deep, how do I tell you?—it was proof of God for me at sixteen. I became an addict of depth, and of dark, and crashing, death-staring fear. I’ve been looking for it ever since. You are looking at me looking at these crashing waves. I’m looking at the eleven-miles horizon and filling my belly with this wonderful feeling. Do you know that? Can you see it in my eyes?

the course set willfully across the ungovernable and dangerous.
North Carolina, 2008—I came up onto the pier above the rushing black ocean. I pressed the balls of my feet onto the riven wood steps, climbing up above the white-spun wave tips, deeper into the saltine smell of the wind. Up there all the people were streaming, cotton shirts ripped and rippling sideways from chests and shoulders, scarves and hair flying straight toward land. I waded to the rail and found the place where mounds of water became breakers against the wooden beams. Rush, crash, recede. I looked into the dark wind, the momentum of four thousand open-ocean miles. I felt the delicious terror slip down my spine for the first time. The thundering—rush crash recede.

Walking out the sixty feet of wood struts and planks felt like walking right over the horizon into unbroken black. But when I got to the end, went up to deck on the roof of the pier house, I opened my eyes into the wind and realized the true scale of the water in front of me. Realized the pier was a pinprick in the black fabric of the Atlantic.

I pressed my palms into the splintered wood poles and let the gut-deep tremor grow from my stomach. The speed of air felt like motion, and with the waves shuddering through the wood below me, I imagined that I was standing in the prow of the ship, rocking and thrusting into the dark pit of sky. Out into the deep. I felt like I was staring straight into a roaring dark heart, some deepest point, closest to the pulsing hot core of the Earth—rush, crash, recede. I heard the first thunder crack out of the
unseen cloud bellies. A storm coming in. The stars terminated twenty degrees above the horizon. I saw the first bolt of lightning split between the thunderheads, revealing their swollen bellies above the waterline, below the brightening stars. *Be still and know that I am God.*

The long rolling,

Steady-póuring

Deep-trenchééd

Green billów:

- James Stephens

I returned to the deck and was immediately battered by wind, cold-to-your-bones wind that took me by the right shoulder and spun me backwards. *Well, when you figure that, coming from west to east it has three thousand miles of flat ocean to accelerate over, that would make some sense,* a coworker later explained. But if that was the logic, shouldn’t passing over Ireland have slowed it down? This wind blew as if the little island I was sailing towards did not exist, blew so hard I was sure it must race all the way here from the Labrador coast. The mountains of Kerry and the Connemara slowed it not at all, more like ant hills to a hurricane than mountains to the westerlies.
Squinting my eyes and reflexively putting out my arms—as if my narrow palms made any buffer against the pounding air—I half fell towards the rail, wrapping my bare fingers gratefully around the white metal rods. It was a bright but hazy day, blue sky and blue ocean. In spite of the wind, the water lay still, so still that when a gull landed twenty yards from the boat, rings of ripples expanded around him. Only the wake of the ship churning up nested triangles across the smooth surface distinguished the atmosphere from the water reflecting it. And farther out to sea, the deep blue by the stern faded into white all around, reflecting the cirrus clouds that wisped light as flour streaks above me, but tightened and merged with the cumulus balled on the horizon. Blue above, blue below, slipping outwards into a ring of white, nothing but the wind-beset gravity to let me know the world wasn’t upside-down. Unnerved, I waited for a while, trying to feel North Carolina, Bray, Tel Aviv, looking for that reaction, that feeling in the vista, in my own body. Eventually I returned below.

The wide-toped

Unbróken,

Green-glacid

Slow-sliding.

- James Stephens
I expected this new ocean to take me by storm, to shout Bible verses at me with heavy breathing. But standing on the deck of the *Ulysses*, now for the first time out on the ocean, I didn’t feel terrified. At least, I didn’t feel the belly-deep terror of staring down absolute emptiness. Instead, I felt a subtler, less exhilarating twist in my gut, less like the stomach-drop of a rollercoaster and more like the sickening clench of a spinning tea-cup ride, like I couldn’t get my bearings, couldn’t establish my center, like gravity was weakening or pulling slant. The blue and white world had a strange surreality, as if at any moment I could reach my hand beyond the rail and come up against canvas, as if the world around me might—with one touch or accidental brush—be unmasked as a cleverly placed painting or series of mirrors.

Cold-flushing

—On—on—on—

Chill-rushing,

Hush-hushing,

... Hush—hushing...

- James Stephens

I headed to the deck a third time. I wandered a bit, watching the couples taking pictures of themselves and of each other, bundled-up twenty-somethings posing at the rail. A few middle-aged men stood in the smoking shelter, hinging their arms
down and up, mechanically puffing on their hand-rolled cigarettes. A pack of young school girls in button down shirts and green plaid skirts raced around against the protestations of several chaperones—"Now girls, girls! Please, all in a row now to get your picture. Girls please!"—but they whirled like propellers through the wind, turning their arms into helicopter blades as they spun and scattered. Laughing.

I watched them from the starboard rail before returning to the quieter port side, consumed again by the forget-me-not dreamscape, probing slowly at the unease in my stomach, the absence of awed reaction. I looked vacantly over the double-paned world of blue and white.

—Until a black dorsal fin broke the surface, a smooth arc up from the water and back down to disappear, leaving no splash on the sun-buffed surface. I gasped and stared hard at the spot, scanning slowly and praying I happened to look in the right place for the right three-second interval. Then in my periphery, a thirty degree turn back east, the sleek black rose-thorn breached again. A dolphin, or maybe a porpoise.

I looked up and down the rail, grinning stupidly, wanting to share my excitement with someone. But the other people standing with me smoked in the plexiglass shelter, or posed for photos before hurrying back inside. Even the girls had left off their play and gone.

Farther aft I noticed an elderly gent eyeing me, leaning on the rail with his shoulders angled against the wind, protecting his cigarette. "Did ya see t’e small whale over d’ere?" he asked grinning. "I saw ‘im come up jus’ over t’ere, but now
‘e’s gone again.” He pointed out over the ocean, but the water stayed smooth blue where we watched.

“I saw one over that way a bit,” I said, pointing to the boat’s frothy wake, “but I haven’t seen him come up in a while.”

The man sidled over, one hand steadying himself, until we were next to each other. “I’ve ne’er seen whale’s out’ere b’fore. T’is is t’e smoothest it’s ever been. Usually yur rockin’ an fallin’. A’ve taken t’is way many times over t’e years. A’bin taken t’is ferry f’r forty years, an you’re a lucky lass, t’is is t’e smoot’est it’s ever been. I’ve ne’er seen t’is b’fore.”

“Really?” I said, trying to sound nonchalant, trying not to feel cheated, looking out over the polished-smooth blue of the water.

“T’is is t’e Irish Sea, *Muir Éireann!*” he said, extending his arm over the rail. “T’e British took everyt’in’ else, but t’ey left us t’e sea. Jus’ t’e sea, t’ey left us. An’ she’s a rough’un she is.”

Take any minute. A tide

Is rummaging in

At the foot of all fields,

- Seamus Heaney
Then where is the fierceness? The sea should not be glass—*glas*—the Gaelic word that encompasses blue, green and gray, the colors of the ocean. *Muir Éireann* is always *glas*.

And in the hush of waters was the sound

Of pebbles rolling round,

For ever rolling with a hollow sound.

- James Stephens

The man made his exclamation looking out at the white eleventh mile, his cigarette pulled against his chest. I crossed my forearms on the rail.

“I’m lucky then,” I said, “Any rougher an’ I’d probably be sick the whole way over, since I’ve never been on a boat across the ocean before.” Good, remind myself quietly of the impracticality of what I wanted. Remind myself of the nausea that would have kept me below decks, out of the wind, rain and waves I imagined, the ocean that gobbled ships. On rougher water, I wouldn’t have seen the black fins splitting the ocean, or the jelly fish pulsing like little white hearts alongside, the seagulls lifting and lowering on the wakes, bobbing like bath toys, their heads swiveling before they pushed awkwardly upward into the sky.

“Once when I was on’ere t’irty years ago, I was quite a bit younger den, t’ank God, but I was comin’ over and I was comin’ down t’e stairs af’er a smoke, an’
between takin’ my foot off’a one step, and settin’ i’ down on t’e ot’er step, t’e ship drop’t six feet. Bam!” he clapped his hands, “jus’ like dat. But I was a bit younger den, t’ank God.”

I couldn’t help but smile, imagining him as a fit young man crossing to Dublin during a mid 80’s storm, the tops of his shoulders soaked from the walk to the smoking shelter, his back drenched because he’d turned it towards the open side of the Plexiglas box, protecting his cigarette from the wet, looking out the glass at the churning sea barely visible through the mist and rain and cloudy dark, his left hand braced against one of the metal support rods. He’d finished his smoke quicker than normal, already starting to shiver, his braced hand going numb on the wet metal. Probably friendly even then, he’d started up a conversation with the other brave addict—“Absolutely lashin’ out”—“feckin’ weat’er”—“let’s me know I’m goin’ ‘ome t’ough”—“feckin’ put out me’ damn cigarette t’ree times t’ough, t’e fuck.” He’d let the butt drop to the streaming deck, grinding and dispersing the ashes with a stomp, trying to push the tingling out of his wet toes. Rubbing his square palms together, then chaffing them against his arms. “Feckin’ cold, well, bye bye mate”—“Yep, bye bye.” He’d headed for the stairs, rocking and slipping on the deck, his short wide frame catching in the wind. Muscling open the door with both feet braced against the tip of the ship, he’d been relieved when the heavy metal slammed behind him, cutting off the freezing sideways slice of the wind. Heading down the stairs with one hand tight to the rail, one step, two step, three—the floor dropped out from under him, throwing him six stairs down to the landing where he sat up with his back to the
wall—“What t’e fuckin’ hell, ahhhh, fuckin’ weat’er and t’is fuckin’ boat”—standing shakily and finding bruises for each missed stair and the wall. Muttering under his breath, “My fuckin’ knee, damnit. Fuckin’ hell.”

I looked at the older incarnation: a short lumpy figure, his square features and straight nose still visible under his slipping skin, a very heavy brow over his green eyes, his head mostly bald, ringed in steely short hair.

“Ahh, fuckin’ t’ings,” he flicked his cigarette over the rail. But then he turned to me, a little bit of boyish bashfulness about him. His still broad shoulders hunched, his head low. “A’ know a’ shouldn’ do’it, but it woan’make much change in t’long run, a’ t’ink.”

Note

The pointed scowl, the mouth
Carved as upturned anchor
And the polished head
Full of drownings.

- Seamus Heaney

It is only now that I think about Maggie’s response, her saying that out on the ocean she had to suppress all thoughts of the unplumbed water below. It is only now I wonder if that was a retroactive explanation for this reaction we both have. Feeling nothing. Our expectations falling flat as we remember the exhilaration of standing on
the shore, tangible proof of God—*Thus says the Lord . . . who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar.*

The ferocity of the ocean is one of God’s credentials, one of the cleared trumpets—Now entering! But what if, out in the belly of that sign, Maggie felt nothing? And then, unwilling to face the alternative, she blamed herself for not being a match for the expanse of the eleven-mile horizon and the twenty-thousand feet below. We’ve come to depend on this awe so much, this response to what we see, and when that fails us we internalize. *You’re just not looking hard enough. You feel too much, that’s why you don’t feel at all.*

A gray foreshore with puddles

Dead-eyed as fish.

-Seamus Heaney

We stood on the deck for a long time, the old smoker and I, as if we could watch the horizon sliding past. He had been looking down at the wake, the tin cans and other flotsam churned silly by the huge ship. But after a few minutes he started up sharply, focused on the dark shapes forming out of the haze off the port bow.

“A’ wonder what t’ose islands are, a’ been on t’is ship many times an’ a’ ne’er seen’em b’fore. Ne’er b’fore. An’ t’ey can’ be t’e Isle’a Man, because we’re too far sout’. A’ just can’ believe a’ ne’er seen’em b’fore.”
I’d been watching the islands approach for some time now, interested in the break of the limitless blue and what it meant for our progress towards Dublin. I hadn’t questioned them, but now, seeing the old-timer’s obvious confusion, I focused on the dark lumps gradually pulling closer.

He peered at them too, as if to make sure they weren’t dark masses of cloud or some strange shadows, a trick of distorted air, but as we neared them they were definitely land. Big, semi-conical heads that rose tall and thick out of the ocean, their sides dropping into cliffs. Three of them, with a possible fourth farther out. I thought perhaps they weren’t islands at all but the beginnings of the Howth headland and Ireland’s Eye, that maybe the smoothness of the water had sped our journey and we were both misgauging our location on the flat, undifferentiated ocean. Maybe some strange fog hid the very near port of Dublin from our view.

But as we slid past them to the other side, there was no land behind, nothing connecting them to a larger island. Just a tiny archipelago receding into the pale reversible world we were passing through, until they were gone.

All I believe that happened there was vision.

- Seamus Heaney

The Holyhead-Dublin ferry route is marked on Google Earth, a scissor straight, cut-here line across the Irish Sea, merging with the Holyhead-Dun Laoghaire, Liverpool-Dublin, and Douglas-Dublin lines at the tip of the Howth headland. But no
matter how much I follow the dashed line I took across the ocean, no matter how much I zoom in, my cursor pulling me across the empty blue screen, I can’t find the islands we saw from the deck. They are either much smaller than I thought, too small to be seen from an orbiting satellite, or they really were cloud-ghosts of our imaginations. I swear I could see them. I could see the rainwater grooves running down their sides, the cracks in the cliff faces weathered by waves. I swear they were there.

by the lamp I write by
a wind from the Irish Sea
is shaking it—
- Seamus Heaney

Unlike Maggie, I won’t refute my Carolina-Tel Aviv theories and emotions. I won’t explain my lack of reactions as a personal failure. I won’t say that I set myself adrift from the confrontation I’d craved, that when the moment came I was not enough, that I loosed the moorings of my own heart’s feelings.

Instead I’ll tell myself the ferry ride was a subtler message, a dream with strange linguistic symbols I have to tease out—imaginary islands—image—is—land—imaginary—is—land. Something, some lesson is there, and if I sit quietly with these memories—doll—fin—dolphin—do—l—fin—I will find it. A lesson in silence and
stillness perhaps—He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’

Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.

I feel like I’m reading some wrack line of knotted rope and shattered spars, bits of shell, a tennis ball from God-knows-where, a metal disk—a wave-tossed coin? A flattened bottle cap? A wave-smoothed sliver of glass that could just as easily be a bit of coke bottle, or windshield, or window. I don’t know what any of it means. I keep thinking—He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’ I do not know. I do not know what it means. The text is there but the cipher is missing.

All day I hear the noise of waters
Making moan,
He hears the wind’s cry to the water’s
Monotone.
- James Joyce

As we slid past the strange islands on the deck of the Ulysses, I felt the unease peak in my gut, an intuition that I couldn’t rely on the conclusions I’d made before. Like I was seeing the seams between the mirrors around me. I watched the islands fade back into the white line of the horizon, and about the time I lost sight of them, the old gent turned to me and offered his leathery, square hand.
“Well, a’ be’er head back t’da gran’children now, but it ’as nice chat’n wit’ya, Annie.” I straightened at the sound of my name, suddenly aware that I couldn’t remember his.

I shook his hand. “Nice talkin’ to ya,” I said.

When he smiled, his eyes crinkled until he half winked at me. Then he clapped my hand and gave it a firm shake before turning away, stumping sturdily across the deck and heading below. Leaving me at the rail with this white-ringed reflection of ocean and sky, the islands past the horizon, Dublin ahead, and in between this strange blue desert I couldn’t grasp.
November

We slid out of the Dublin traffic, up the dark lanes of the fishing village, to the parking lot atop the headland. Opening our doors into the night wind, we stood and looked out over the capital’s lights tracing a connect-the-dot grid below us, curved around the black water of the harbor. Nearest to us, the tall twin smokestacks of the port reached into the air, green lights paired all the way up. The farther-away lights condensed, blurred together along the Liffey, the city center, Phoenix park a sudden pool of dark to the west, stitched across with a single lit road. The two-toned arteries of major highways wrapped loose curves around the city—white lights coming, red lights going. I strained to pick out familiar landmarks, the O’Connell Street Spire, the Christ’s Church steeple, but we stood too far away, the bay too wide.

Darragh opened the back door of the car and whistled. Zeb dropped gracefully to the asphalt, grinning ridiculously, his pink belly trembling with quick pants as Darragh clipped on the leash. I stood with my hands deep in my coat pockets, my chin tucked into the soft protection of my scarf. An ocean liner, or maybe just a large ferry, steamed out of the port, its lights throwing a dim yellow varnish on its wrinkled black wake.
Darragh stood at the back bumper looking up the coast—“So that’s Portmarnock, Donaghtede, Malahide t’the nort’,” tugging Zeb up beside him, “And sout’ would be Ballsbridge, Blackrock, an’ Dalkey.”

“Bray somewhere down there,” I said, recalling the resort town he and I had visited last June, during my long Irish summer. “We could see Dublin harbor from the top of the hill.”

“Maybe it’s around the corner a bit,” he said, and I felt distanced a little when the only place I knew was out of sight, too far away to make the list. His chin shifted right towards the city, “Nice isn’t it?”

“It’s very pretty.”

“It’s a good place to come up with a book,” something he’d been saying all week about beaches and cliffs and overlooks, meaning it was a good place to sit in the car with a book. The thought of driving to an overlook just to sit in the driver’s seat and read was foreign to me. If it was cold enough that I didn’t want to be sitting outside, why would I leave my armchair? Perhaps an Irish adaptation to enjoy the outdoors in spite of the northern latitude. I shook my head.

We stood side by side for a few moments, Zeb shifting from foot to foot on a short lead. “Ready?” Darragh asked.

“Ready,” I said and followed him across the brassy light of the parking lot, through the families coming in from early evening strolls, other walkers of dogs, couples of twenty and sixty sitting in parked sedans. The three of us moved quietly away from the lights, to the gray-shadowed gap of the trailhead, opening like a mouth
in the low woody brush growing tight on the rocky cliffs, plunging bare into the pewter plain of the sea.

May

I came up to Howth on my third day in Dublin. It felt odd to be leaving the city so soon, but thinking of the ocean and two-hours-out-of-water fish, I zipped up my boots and packed my bag.

I left the city early, walking up past St. Stephen’s Green, Merrion Square, and Trinity under bright sunlight. It rained once, a brief downpour out of nowhere, so short it only dampened my hair and the backs of my thighs. One ticket north to “Howth?” I said, pronouncing the full “ow” dipthong. “Howth,” the woman at the counter corrected me, making it rhyme with “both.” I nodded, then walked up to the brick and wrought iron platform, caught the train, watched the schoolboys in their navy blue uniforms, young women with their hands hooked through their sweethearts’ elbows, grinning at their outstretched iPhones as they snapped photos. I stared out the window to watch the city dwindle, first to warehouses, then another stretch of suburbs, and suburbs, more suburbs in brick, plaster and gray. Spread with tennis courts and parking lots, a green rugby field. And then we passed a long apartment building with nothing visible behind it but the cloud-knit sky. I sat up a little straighter, straining to see beyond the shingles.
As someone who grew up among hills, I can feel flat spaces before I see them. I know how rare it is to see a row of houses, a low hill, a high wall, and not see a single roof, tree, or telephone pole beyond. That’s how I recognize the ocean before I see it, when nothing is visible past these short obstructions, only the sky, the airy emptiness that belies the water.

And then a cove to the left, tangled brown and black with low-tide debris. Then a gasp of blue on the right, a bit of ocean seen—flash—down a side street. Then the houses stopped, the tracks running right along the buff colored beach, an inlet, hemmed north, south and west by rising headlands. The train ran up the south edge, approaching the fishing town.

I disembarked under a sky overcast with rough iron gray. Up the road and around a corner from the station, the town opened sleepy and silent, summer canopies furled into the eves of the restaurants, outdoor furniture stowed away. One other stroller ahead of me on the sidewalk. I rambled down the stone pier lined with seafood restaurants and fishmongers on one side, bright moored boats on the other—red, green, glossy black. The salty-flesh smell of the day’s catch blowing off every deck and out every door. Then down to the harbor, a rocky spit of beach, the cliffs of the headland folding out into the sea.

I clambered out among the rocks, shucking my bag of notebooks and pens by a blue-streaked boulder, balancing on thick boot soles as I stepped from rock to rock, out to the middle-ground where the water rushed in between the stones with each new wave, then receded with a deep, slow crackle. Stones being rocked and pulled into
each other. I squatted with each sole on a rock tall enough to keep it’s head dry, looked out to sea—the flat of the ocean framed on the left by cliffs, the green lawns and hearty shrubs tipping into rough rock walls, fine old houses perched along the edge. The sounds of the town waking up behind me, owners shouting to each other as they opened their shops. Day-trippers chattering in on later buses.

Down the shore a young couple hoisted a toddler over the stones, “One, two, threeeeeee,” her legs stiff and splayed every time they lifted her, her red tights showing beneath her light linen skirt.

A fishing trawler out near the point, rusted and green-painted. Morning here, at Howth.

_June_

“Did we walk in on a bagpiping convention?” I asked, as Sara and I rounded the corner from the train station to the village. All across the green that ringed the harbor, sets of fifteen to twenty stout men strapped with bass drums, snare drums and bagpipes ranged in circles, marking time with crisp heel-raises, their buttoned white spats brushing briskly from the grass. Their tall socks pinned with plaid ribbon to match their kilts and caps—green, red, brown, gray, blue—matching the tassels, cords and bag covers of the bleating instruments.

“Only in Ireland,” I said.
“Or Scotland, or Wales, or parts of the United States and Canada,” Sara teased, her black-iris eyes bright, her fingers working through the straight end of her braid as we walked. She glanced at me.

I stuck my tongue out at her and she returned the gesture.

We walked across the grass through the roving bands of plaid. Women laid picnic lunches on foldout tables, un-stacking coolers of water and lunchmeats, children teasing seagulls with French fries or the last sticky remnants of ice cream cones.

We came to the stone wall of the pier, up the narrow steps to the flat promenade, wandered, chatted, turned back towards the stony shingle at the edge of town, lying in a crescent between cliffs and streets and harbor. The headland rose up in tiers of gray-brown cliffs and green slopes. But bordering the little stone beach, where the shingle met the steep headland, six caves stood plain. Tidal caves I hadn’t dreamed existed, not till now, not till their jagged-edged mouths sat above the water level, draped with neon green algae and brown black slime. The tide must have fallen twenty feet at least, to completely cover the line of six black-lipped bolt-holes that drank in the rising sea. Sudden sinkholes destabilizing how I understood this coastline.

“That’s incredible,” I murmured, “I have never seen those caves before.”

“Really?” Sara turned to me, bouncing slightly on the balls of her feet.

“I must have always been here at high tide, somehow.”

“Hmmm,” she was already moving. We followed the steep curve of road up the side of the town, finding a wrought iron gate and a steep-cut stair that would let us
down on the stones outside the sea caves. A crowd of young Germans—tall, blond and cavorting—tugged and pushed each other at the edges of the pocked gray stones bordering the sea, earning some wet shoes for their games. A couple of young men started hefting some of the round, sea-tossed stones and slinging them into the water conspicuously near the seven young women. They shrieked and shied from the spray.

“Me big man, throw biggest rock,” Sara grunted, sticking out her lower jaw the way my father and uncle do when they talk half-marathons and offspring achievements—chest pounding. I laughed.

We strayed out among the rocks, first leap-frogging out as far from shore as we dared go on slick rocks and still-dry shoes, but eventually we turned back, heading for the caves and whatever they were hiding. Sara walked far in, almost to the back, looking up at the oozy ceiling, wet with black, slimy life. Looking down past her laces at the cracks in the rocks, plants welling up between small clams clamped on to wait out the water loss. Green sea grasses waving in the cross-prairie wind of the tide. She stood at the back wall, balancing steadily on the stones that rose up above the water sloshing in and out. I watched her eyes follow the curved stone walls up to the jagged ceiling, the way I’ve seen people follow the arches in a cathedral or a cable bridge.

I hung in the doorways, slightly repulsed by the brown-black grime uniformly coating the irregular surface, by the stagnant smelling water dripping from the ceiling. I wanted to follow Sara all the way to the deepest recess, to not care about the raw, salted-flesh smell. I wanted to put my even footprints on the boulders, to run my eyes
over the walls, but I stood nervously in the weak sunlight of the entrance. To Sara these caves were just another discovery in this landscape she was exploring, but to me they were brackish black holes opening in the coast I’d known, or thought I’d known. I paused, took one step into the cave and turned, looking out through the natural arch at the familiar town, the harbor, the crisp geometry of sails. Looking for regularity, for stability. Wondering why tidal caves could shift familiarity to uncertainty.

**November**

The trail was dark and set with rocks I kept tripping over, “Watch out, rock there,” Darragh teased.

“I know that now.” But he said the same thing when I stumbled again.

“Ya need to eat more carrots,” he said, his solution to everything—diet and exercise.

“Are those the ones that help night vision?” I asked and felt him nod solemnly in the dark.

Twenty feet down the trail he let Zeb off lead, the long-legged canine zigzagging across our path, sniffing and peeing and bobbing through the knee-high shrubs, galloping through puddles to spite his master, running ear-pricked to other hounds and terriers, standing nose-to-wagging-tail for a while before all moved on.

We didn’t talk much, just walked holding gloved hands, a little awkwardly, not lace-fingered the way most couples do, but clasped the way I hold someone’s hand for
the Our Father during Mass. Our padded fingers wouldn’t allow anything different. We silently slid apart when puddles forced us to walk single file along the trail edge, or across a line of bricks laid through the thin mud of rainwater and ash colored clay. Rejoining on the other side.

“Is that a castle there?” he asked, moving off the path onto a wildcat trail through the gorse, pushing up onto a black-veined boulder that shrugged its way out of the hillside. I jumped up beside him and cast around, spotting the stone pattern of rings and rectangles further down the slope.

“The trail I took must have been much lower on the cliffs,” I said. “I had no idea this was here when I was hiking, and it took me the better part of four hours to hike all the way from town to the lighthouse and back. We’re already almost on the other side.”

“Really? Four hours?”

“Maybe less than that. I guess I wasn’t booking it either.”

“The trail must wiggle around right on the coast then,” he said, shifting behind me, his hands clasped loosely on my stomach, a presence steady as the boulder under my feet. Easier to look out over the slate ocean and sky fading into uniform black, easier to stare into the wind rushing out of that depth, face it, let my short hair brush back, stone beneath and the mountain behind.

“Another ferry coming in,” he said, and I felt his chest and shoulders move as he looked right towards the little pocket of lit windows chugging in across the black.
“And another farther out,” I said, pointing out to the deepest blue of the eastern horizon, barely distinguishable from the water line, where another greenish yellow light was slowly growing.

“So many of t’em, just one after anot’er.” He paused, “A lot’a lights out t’ere, must be buoys to guide’em in,” moving slightly behind my right shoulder so that he could point along my sight line, four pinpricks of white light, constant as stars but as bright as flashlights held fifty feet away.

And then closer on my right, the Baily lighthouse rose out of the point with its squat stone tower, domed white roof. The air held just enough moisture that we could see the triangular beam peering out into the thick, dark air, rotating like a searchlight. Flashing into our eyes before sliding away. I gauged the force of the wind and wondered if there would be fog in the morning, if the water would gather into a blanket wrapped around the cliffs, or maybe the wind would carry it all away. For now, the light swept the air, hardly reaching twenty feet out, it seemed. I wondered how sailors could ever see it. The light never struck the water.

“T’at must be an actual lighthouse out t’ere as well,” Darragh said, pointing again over my shoulder at a light several miles out, a beam that rounded the corner, glinting at us at ten-second intervals.

“A lighthouse?”

“Yeah, t’e beam is so steady, and much brighter t’an t’e buoys.”

*But what could it possibly be built on*, I thought. I couldn’t remember seeing an island, or even a half-exposed rock out there, as I’d hiked the cliffs on my previous
visits. But with the eleven-mile horizon so much farther than it looked, and the circling beam three quarters of the way out, perhaps it was much farther away than I thought, too far to see anything but the nighttime beacon. I stared at it, becoming aware of how different this place felt at night. I wanted desperately to stay riveted to this stone, watching the rotating beckons of two lighthouses, until the sun rose and illuminated the little outcropping of rock the second lighthouse was built on. Show me it had always been there, that this place had not changed with the turning of Earth towards outer space. Turn it back, to the sun. I wanted to move forward while I stayed right here.

I shifted on my feet and Darragh interpreted my movement as impatience. He slid away, and we walked on.

May

I meandered happily up through town under breaking clouds, sun spearing down to touch the rose gardens and bits of ocean near the horizon. Up to a trailhead on the northern side of the headland, the landscape opening into green-and-gray slopes, terraced like a rice paddy with stones curbing every lip and edge. Paths wove thick through the shelves and narrow gaps. Teenagers and backpackers and picnickers settled into one nook or another, cross-legged on the grass or daring to dangle their feet over the distant whitecaps.
I passed through and carried on, taking the low trail ducking in and out of the wave-cut coves, forty feet up. Bright yellow flowers on my right, still curled in their spring bulbs, late coming summer on this north-facing slope. On my left a gray stone plunge with puffins and gulls tucked screaming into the cracks. My boots finding easy tread on the dirt path, the wind rushing through my scarf with its sea-scented fingers.

I rounded one corner, stopped dead, staring far down and out to sea. Something gray, though not a bird, rocking gently on the breaths of the waves. Then the sun emerged from the clouds and flash, a long sleek body. Glistening mottled silver beneath the surface, his flippers moving slowly, treading water, if seals tread water. I bent a knee to the ground and knit my fingers over my shin, waiting and watching until the sun tucked back behind the clouds and he slipped beneath the opaque surface.

Walking on, such a joy to discover this landscape, each cove its own unique contour holding a bit of ocean, a bit of cliff, a bit of sky. Around another bend into the dip of another cove, I nearly screamed. In a slight overhang at the elbow of the trail, a nearly naked man perched on a log drug in as a bench. He was singing to himself, his red-rimmed, wide blue eyes staring straight into mine but never wavering, never blinking, never nodding a greeting, never breaking melody. His head was shaved, his body trimly muscled and completely hairless, covered inch by inch with tattoos in black, blue and yellow. A wide-mouthed cobra on the left half of his chest, a
hummingbird on his bicep, a rose under one ear. He sat hunch-backed on the fallen log, his bare feet in the dust, wearing only ragged jeans cut off at mid-thigh.

I either felt or imagined his eyes all the way around the opposite curve of the cove. Around the next rocky spur, a trail on my right, and I escaped up through a patch of scorched gorse to the top of the hill, a parking lot at the top, a view of the city I passed quickly, unnerved now, the clearing clouds of the day shaken, the pitch of the afternoon changed. I left Howth on long, quick strides, cravings for seafood and wandering driven away, wanting to be on the train, in the busy Dublin streets, invisible in a crowd.

_June_

Bagpipers were scattering across the grass, tumbling like a bunch of plaid leaves whipped up by a tornado, Sara and I didn’t understand at first what was happening. Then the rain hit us. Huge, shooter marble drops that hurt when they hit. Wind that pushed us over, a bowling ball into the ninepins. We broke and ran through the kilts and knee-socks, through the mothers folding in the picnic lunches and kids squealing, diving for cover under tables, into cars.

We sprinted for the train station, soaked before we’d made the bend in the road, pressed with other soggy turn-tails, squeezing through the station’s turnstiles. A five-minute wait, then we sat in the plastic seats, dripping, eating damp French fries from our wax paper bags. A rocking ride through the rain-cleared streets of the suburbs,
then up, towards the clouds on raised tracks, the rain slick metal and stone of Dublin
city ranged to the horizon.

November

We came back to the car park, now nearly empty, though the city spread just as
bright, brighter for the deeper black of the falling night. We stood for a moment, Zeb
back on his short lead, arrested by Darragh’s fist around the end. Dog, man and I
looked over the cliffs. I ran my eyes again over the highways and the river line, tracing
the dark rim of Phoenix Park, the fading lights of the suburbs. I couldn’t find anything
to rest on. My eyes roved over the Dublin as over a badly taken photograph, one that
lacks the composition or contrast to guide the viewer’s focus through its visual
landscape. I felt anxious looking at it.

I glanced at Darragh, standing as a thick black silhouette against the light noise
redden the low clouds behind. He stood in a strong, square stance, feet spread,
shoulders pressed wide and down. Steady and solid, unchanged, unchanging. I felt so
flighty and small, a breath of wind to his boulder-like steadiness. But I could feel the
air shifting around me, something settling in my gut. The cliffs I’d walked tonight had
not been those of my third day in Ireland, not the ones I’d seen with Sara. The city
with its many-lined palm lit below me was not the same one I’d stayed with for the
summer. Not the same for me. I had crossed a bridge in relation to this place, and I
was standing at the other end, hesitating. It was time to go. Time to leave.
I was sore and heavy thinking that, thinking that and sensing Darragh next to me, watching the red taillights trailing each other into the west.

“\‘I wonder what makes them flicker like that,\’” I said, seeing how the lights winked and danced, street lamps and headlights and windows.

“I don’t know,” Darragh answered as he let Zeb back up into the car. “I guess they are though. I wonder what makes’em do that.”

The ‘what’ is movement, invisible currents in the air—pollen and dust and smoke shifting in constant streams, unperceivable until magnified by miles of distance and the high contrast of electric lights in the dark. Everyday shiftings in the air that we don’t see.

I shivered in the settling night chill, the dark ocean wind whistling in over the cliffs. The city winked and wavered, and I looked away. I read somewhere that without time there could not be change, so there could not be loss, so there could not be the guilty need I felt for leaving Ireland. I could not stay. The restless forward-march that drove me here was not done. It still pushed me, not forward, but elsewhere. The bottoms of my feet itched. Where next? Where next? The demand pricked like an injustice done to man and island. How could I explain? The tie that had called me back to this city this second time, the draw of the singing capital, greening countryside, laughing-eyed Irishman, that tie had snapped under the strain of my own motion. One pin had come out of the dress somewhere and all the silk billowed slowly to the floor without a sound. No catastrophe just a silent coming-apart.
I shifted slightly, my boot soles grinding quietly against the asphalt, turning to the buoys and ships, trying to read these lamps scattered through the emptiness—rocking, guiding, rotating, beckoning, warning, coming, going. Ships, buoys, light houses, more ships, more buoys. Rocking as constant and unknown as floating stars randomly stitched into the uniform black of ocean and sky, stretching out over the horizon, the edge of an expanding universe.
Works Cited


