

Contemporary Irish Life & Art

HOLY SHOW

An annual magazine that presents
all flavours of life, society and
culture through the eyes of
Ireland's artists and writers.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Writer **Lisa McInerney** and Senator **Lynn Ruane** share memories of school and university, and trade visions for a better education system in Ireland.

Lisa McInerney is the author of *The Blood Miracles* and *The Glorious Heresies*, the latter of which won the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and the Desmond Elliott Prize.

Lynn Ruane is an Independent Senator in Seanad Éireann since April 2016. She was the President of the Trinity College Dublin Students' Union from 2015 to 2016. Her book, *People Like Me*, won the An Post Non-Fiction Book of the Year in 2018.

Their conversation is set alongside scenes from *Deserted Schoolhouses of Ireland*, written and photographed by **Enda O'Flaherty**. The photos depict Ireland's original two-room schoolhouses, many of which still stand since the birth of free primary education in the early nineteenth century.

Enda O'Flaherty is an archaeologist and archaeological surveyor, a photographer and author of *Deserted Schoolhouses of Ireland*. He blogs at endaoflaherty.com

LISA AND LYNN WERE GIVEN a little homework before they met, to look over Enda's book. They bring their copies with them to the Irish Writers Centre to kick off their conversation.

LISA: There's a couple of these schools up near me, up in the desolate plains of Gort, County Galway. There's one in there, Réidh Reamhar. It means thick field or mountain plain. I'm saying to myself, Réidh Reamhar, where do I know that from? Then it hits me – Oh Jesus, that's right near me. I was thinking before we met, Lynn won't have these types of schools in her background. These are two-roomed buildings set half way up a mountain, literally, for the farming kids in the area.

LYNN: Actually, my granddad might have gone to one like these – my dad's dad was Mayo – but everybody else grew up in Dublin. My dad grew up in the tenements on Ushers Quay. They would have probably all left school very early. When I was looking



Lisa McInerney



Lynn Ruane

at it, I was thinking, Where are all these places? Am I living in the same country? [Both laugh.] I actually felt so not Irish. You're reading it and thinking, I really need to get around this country a bit more. A lot of these places sound lovely.

LISA: It is a bit mad, isn't it? Urban and rural Ireland are like two different countries.

LYNN: That's what it felt like when I was reading it. I felt so disconnected from it. But I noticed that there's are some similar buildings in Dublin. I wondered where I saw them. I don't know whether it reminded me of Andrew's Community Centre in Rialto,

or whether it was something similar in Inchicore. But there was a building in Kilfinan in Limerick and I thought that they're buildings that I recognise, they obviously came from a certain time, or architect. There's loads of them in Dublin.

LISA: I was raised by my grandparents, so when I'm talking about my parents, I'm really talking about my



Drumlish, Co. Longford.

Nana. She's 85 now. Back then, you'd go to school until you were about 11 or 12, and that's about it. She had eight kids and then she ended up with me, so nine altogether. For her, the idea of education would have been really important, but only as a concept. She really wanted me to go to university but had no idea what I might study or what good would it serve. She didn't know how to funnel me there. So it was a case of, *I expect you to do well but I've no idea how to guide you*. It was a case of, *As long as you've done your homework and the teachers aren't cross with you, you're grand*.

LYNN: That would be very prevalent in working-class communities as well where there's no history of third level education. There's a real deficit of information in terms of parents being able to know what to search for or how to facilitate the kind of decision-making around where to go to college.

LISA: This is exactly it, and if it wasn't for the fact that I had all these siblings – aunts and uncles really,

that were twenty and thirty years older than me – who had the capacity to look for that information on my behalf, there's no way my Nana would have known what to do or where to go for it. Her oldest fella Christy went to university in Galway, and that was a big deal. He died quite young so he never even finished the degree, but they gave him the honorary degree which they put up on the wall. None of the rest went to third level at all. If you did the Leaving Cert, you were doing well. My auntie was married around 17. My mam had me at 19. So when it was time for me to go, Nana was like, *You must go to university so you can get another one of these*. And I never got another one of those because two years through my degree at UCC I decided, I'm going to have a baby! [Laughs]. Again, I failed the working classes.

LYNN: You should send your granny back to do a degree. Let her get her own.

LISA: The formal education thing, it would have

stopped for her and my granddad very young. The expectation was that he's going to be a tradesman and she's going to be a housewife. But my granddad – he was wildly intelligent. There were no books in the house really, but he read the broadsheets every day. There was no room for art, no stories apart from what

over there. I don't think intelligence is wasted as long as you find some way to express it. But you have to be very comfortable, with a financial safety net, to afford not to have a third level education.

LISA: I regretted that the second I said it because it wasn't a waste. He was a tradesman. And although he lived in a council house he still did alright for himself. But where does that enter your head? I don't have a degree, and I'm still doing it myself, saying, *If you don't have a degree, you've wasted your brain*. Where does that come from? It's something that we cling to.

LYNN: It's usually networks and the people you meet that are important at third level. Sometime people can even get a third level education, but without the social or cultural capital outside of that education they can't capitalise on it. Even if they have a third level degree, they can't access employment because



Willbrook, Craggaunboy, Co. Clare.

you'd tell in the pub. But he was really well informed, really articulate, and in the most vicious way. He could turn on you very quickly and make you look like a right tool. And you kind of think, God, that's a brain that went to waste.

LYNN: Of course, that's not to say that the formal education system is the right way to express your intelligence, or validate your intelligence. But education is also the means by which people can transform their lives. So while I think we place too much importance on the type of intelligence that a third level education can get you, it still increases the chances of addressing intergenerational poverty. It's mostly middle-class people and more affluent people – and not working class people who don't have access to education – that ask, *Does education really matter? Or Do you have to go to university? Or Aren't apprenticeships great? But...*

LISA: *But not for our kids.*

LYNN: Exactly, *Apprenticeships, but only for you*

they don't know anyone in the sectors that they're qualified to work in. Law, for example, is especially difficult to get internships if you're not in the know.

LISA: Even the whole internship culture is a disaster. In the arts or journalism or publishing, if you can't afford to maintain your life without getting paid you're not going to get anywhere because you have to do your internship. You have to know those people already, so how do you find them if you're not on the inside?

The Playground

LYNN: There's a line in *Deserted Schoolhouses of Ireland* that says, "Aside from an individual's family, few things have greater impact on our development of our personality, our understanding of the world around us and the mechanisms we use to deal with and interpret that world than our experience of the classroom and the schoolyard."



Bunnadden, Co. Sligo.

I thought “schoolyard” was really strange to put in there because I struggle to remember much about the schoolyard, which obviously happened every day. I wonder if it’s because it was less traumatic. The most formative stuff happened within that controlled setting with a teacher. What I remember most is the teachers and their impact on me. I remember the setting of the classroom and the anxiety that brings. That’s when personalities are really developing, around 12, 13, 14, and you start to put it up to teachers, question their knowledge, their experience, whether they’re right or wrong. But the schoolyard didn’t have a massive impact on me, because I was obviously just running around, I had a sense of freedom there.

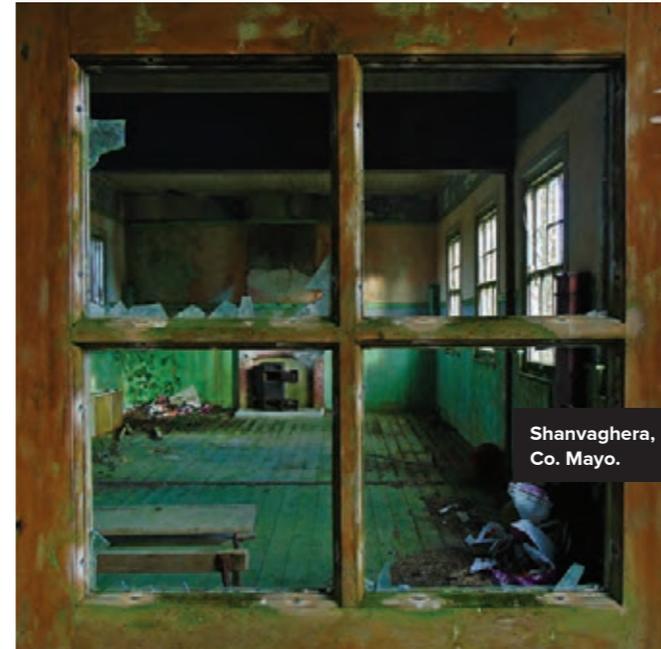
LISA: What was your school like? You were in

Tallaght, weren’t you?

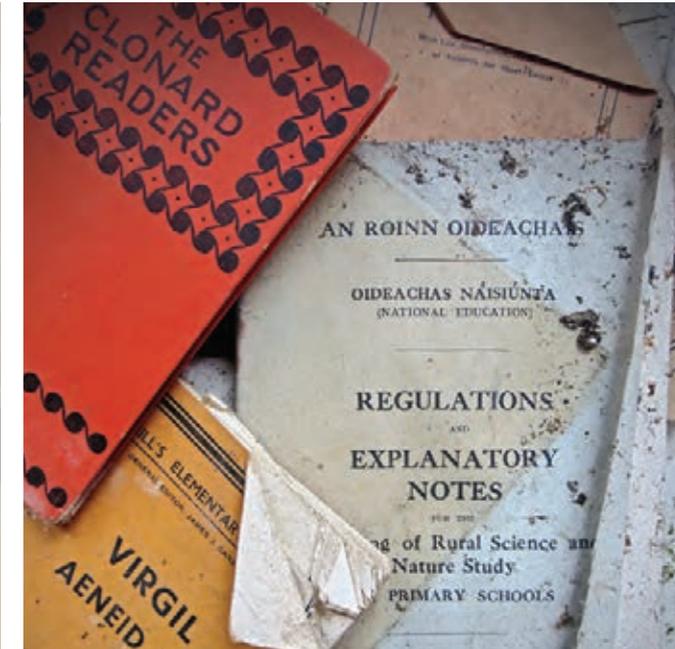
LYNN: Yeah, the school is grand and it’s not grand. It’s grand when you don’t know any better. But then when you look at the bigger picture. When you start to become aware of class, it looks different. But I remember every teacher, you know, and I remember the feeling that they gave me. I write about it in my book, about the experience that one teacher had on me.

My first teacher, Miss Tuohy [for junior and senior infants] was lovely, and I think having her first gave me a good foundation.

My second teacher, my mam got me taken out of her class because she lied about me. I was always real giddy and chatty. She was horrible, I don’t mind saying it. She was a horrible woman. When



Shanvaghera, Co. Mayo.



my daughter Jordanne got to school-going age, not much had changed. Jordanne was only fifteen years younger than me, so the same teachers were there and the same principal, Ms Molloy.

I said to Ms Molloy, *You know Jordanne is going into first class.* It was around January, I was giving her plenty of time. I said, *I just want to remind you what happened with myself and Mrs X.* It wasn’t just me, it wasn’t just a personality thing. Everyone was petrified of her, kids wouldn’t go to school, crying in the morning; she was a horrible woman. And Ms Molloy said, *Yep, no problem, no worries. I’ll make sure that that doesn’t happen.* Usually, as the summer goes on, the kids start getting all excited, wanting to know what teacher they have. But in this case, when you’re going into first class, you’re not so excited because the chances of getting Ms X are very likely. They called out Jordanne’s name in her class. And I stood up and I said, *Over my dead body. Never ever will I inflict you on my child.* I marched Jordanne out by the hand and brought her to a different school. It was disappointing because I knew the rest of my school experience was really positive, and this woman had the fucking ability to suck it out of you, you know. She must have had such a negative impact on generations of school-goers.

LISA: What is the point in being a teacher if you’re that fucking miserable? You can’t be a happy person if you’re behaving that way.

LYNN: So that’s one memory, but I remember my first memory of school was getting Ms Touhy, and running out of the school hall and down to her classroom. I can’t remember why I was so excited to get her, but she must have been nice to me in the mornings when we dropped my brother to school. She’d taught my brother already so I must have really wanted to have her. I remember my mam telling me, *Lynn, you just darted out of the school hall when they called your name out.*

I would have been only 4. I ran down the hall, into Ms Touhy’s class – while she’s teaching a class, like – shouting, *I have you next year, I have you next year.* I was delighted. A few years back, I was sitting in Eason’s doing my book signing, it was after the Ray Darcy Show, and in walks Ms Touhy.

LISA: Myself and my kid had a lot of the same teachers too; we went to the same primary and secondary school. But what weirds me out is that as a child you think all teachers are ancient, but I meet them now and they’re exactly the same. I’m like, *I thought you were fifty then, but you must have been only twenty. Like what the hell is happening?* They

just stay the same, like one big constant in your life.

Your primary school was part of a city, so everyone was from the same social background, were they?

LYNN: We're Tallaght, so everyone in the local schools would be from Killinarden. I went to Killinarden Community School for secondary. That's where I ran amuck, so I was always worried about the impact that would have on Jordanne.

LISA: How did she get on?

LYNN: She certainly did better than me in terms of

school where there was seven hundred pupils from all over the south county. So you got a huge mix of people. There was the ould council house kids, and then there were the daughters and sons of the vets and doctors, so there was a real mix. I was thinking about this earlier...

LYNN: That's positive, we don't have that kind of mix.

LISA: Well, I'm not so sure.

LYNN: Really?



when she was pissed off with teachers. She managed not to have outbursts like me. But she did stand up to teachers if she thought they were wrong. I definitely thought she was a lot more respectful... I don't know if respectful is the right word.

LISA: Mature maybe?

LYNN: Maybe mature, yeah. More adult-like. But there's also a Gaelscoil in our area that serves a wider community. Jaelynne is starting secondary school there now. She's had a fresh run, without her mother's background tainting her through her school years.

Class Divides

LISA: I went to school in Gort in South County Galway, despite my weird [Cork] accent. There was a bunch of different primary schools around the townland. The one I went to was in town, so we were the townies. But then you go into secondary

LISA: Here's the thing. I was thinking about it this morning, how well we self-segregated. It's only when I look back that I see it. You don't notice when you're a kid why you're friends with this girl and not friends with this girl, but all of them hung out together, and all of the rest of us hung out separately.

LYNN: But were they all together at primary level?

LISA: Yeah, they would have.

LYNN: So that's the issue really, that it's difficult to break those barriers down once those relationships have been formed at primary,

LISA: I get you. But because I was in the townie primary school, there would have been a social mix there too. Looking back, I think it was a case of everyone having different experiences. These kids had cars. They went on holidays. So they had more in common. Someone might ask you, *Can you come to my house?* And you go, *No, I can't because I don't have a car, I don't have any way to get to your house.*

LYNN: Even if you self-segregated, did mixing together not break down some barriers in terms of judgement between groups?

LISA: It kind of creeps in regardless. The judgement shouldn't have even been there in the first place, but it was, it became like, *Oh, do you not do horse-riding lessons?*

LYNN: Are you serious? I would have been like, *I'll rob your fucking horse* [both laughing].

LISA: It got worse as you became a teenager. It got

words, and you don't know how to respond, so you get frustrated and respond with anger. Then you're the worst fecker in the world, and their response is, *Sure that's all you'd expect.*

LISA: I wasn't a great fighter at all. I was the kind of person you couldn't even bully because I was off somewhere else, writing stories in my head. But you're right because the girls that did fight, it wasn't just that they were the worst in the world; the other wans then were terrified of them. But that wasn't any good



really shitty. It was like, *Oh, where did you get your jeans,* and you say, *I got them in Penney's.* Or you wouldn't tell them, and then they'd go, *It's OK, I got mine in Penney's,* and you'd go, *Yeah, I got mine in Penney's too.* Then they'd go, *I actually got mine in the boutique in Galway.*

LYNN: [Laughing wildly.]

LISA: Oh, they were real, pure shitty. All the popular crowd, their dads owned companies or were professionals, and then there was the rest of us just skulking around the edges going, *I don't know what I'm doing.* But it's madness when you think about it; how it sets in so quickly; how you figure out how this girl has a different type of life to you. Therefore you can be friendly, but you won't be friends.

LYNN: My fear would be that I'd nearly reinforce those judgements. When you feel so much on the back foot to someone, I would end up fighting. I'd end up resorting to anger. People cut you apart with their



either, because then the fighters stop trying at school; they don't really want to engage with anyone who's succeeding at school. And because we had streaming at secondary school, the academic divide between classes increased. Some at the lower end stopped after Junior Cert altogether.

LYNN: When you're growing up, you feel like you can't articulate yourself. When you're being shamed or put down, and you don't have the vocabulary to express it, fighting becomes your only currency. I always remember having respect for people based on how well they could fight. That would be a contribution, *See her over there, she's a real good fighter.* I thought, *Oh, right, maybe I can be good at this then. I get put down for everything else, but I'll fight.* It's really sad – the level of competition between people at that young age, and fighting being seen as such a positive thing.

LISA: I was just gently mediocre at everything.



Shanvaghera, Co. Mayo.

Mediocre at school, mediocre at fighting, mediocre at buying jeans in Penney's. Everything. Just pure mediocre. I went under the radar, sitting there with the head out the window. Certain teachers really liked me because I was quiet. Others took against me, just didn't like me at all.

There was one particular one, in secondary school, she was a substitute teacher, but a real regular substitute. She was also the mother of one of the popular girls. The nice girls. She took a real set against me. If my book was slightly over on the next desk, she'd swipe it away, *Keep your things to yourself*. Anything at all that I did, she'd have a go at me. It was just so weird to me because I'd be thinking to myself, *I don't do anything, I just sit here quietly being mediocre*. It was really bizarre.

There was something similar with my cousins. I lived in one of the old workers houses just outside the town, a terrace of ten houses; whereas my cousins were in the newer council estate. It was the kids from that estate who got in trouble with the teachers. They weren't seen as being spirited or mature. Anything they said back to the teacher, they were in trouble. Whereas the vets' and doctors' and solicitors' daughters, the same kind of back-chat would be seen as banter; they could have a joke with the teachers.

Again, I didn't notice any of this at school.

Now I had some fucking amazing teachers too, I don't want to have a pop at them all, there were some fucking amazing teachers as well. But as you look back...

LYNN: Yeah, it's only when you've left school that things become clearer. In school, I was someone different every year. Which when I look back I think, What the hell was going on for me? From a very early age, I realised I always wanted to be the best at everything. The standard I set for myself was to be the best. So I'd start with things that were looked upon positively by teachers and society, but if I couldn't achieve, I'd turn to peer groups for validation.

I think of how much I slagged people in school. I always wanted to be one of the boys.

I was very brash, very boyish, very in-your-face, very show-offy. Always having to get the last word. Quite witty, but to a point where I'd put someone down in a second. And I'd think, *God, why are you being like that, that's not very nice*, you know what I mean? But it all sprang from this vulnerable place of wanting to be liked. I'd just shift who I wanted to be liked by as the years went on. So you start wanting to be liked by, say, your teacher, or your mammy, you know? Then as I got older, it was like, Well, maybe this



Carrigan, Co. Cavan.

group over here will think that because I'm real smart or will put it up to someone or will slag someone or even make people feel quite uncomfortable. It's like, you know that phrase you hear growing up, *Ah, you're not able for a slagging*. Actually, am I slagging you or am I bullying you? You're having a negative impact on them but you think it's hilarious. When I look back at moments like that it makes me scream inside. On the other hand, if something went wrong, I'd be the first person to intervene and help out.

LISA: [Laughing]. People were probably thinking, I'll deploy her under certain circumstances, I'll point her at this fella and off she'll go.

Poetry with 2Pac

LYNN: Yeah. People had that kind of love-hate relationship with me – it's the same relationship I've had with myself. I'd feel quite sorry for myself sometimes. I'd say that relationship I had with myself growing up was very much reflected in the relationships everyone else had with me. I was both sides of the coin, I think. I wasn't very predictable. I don't think I am now either. [Laughing]. I don't know how I'd have got on in one of these one-room classrooms. I'd say I'd have been the absolute Antichrist.

LISA: That's the thing, though; there was no break from the teachers at all. Speaking to my grandmother, she remembers that the teachers were fucking wicked. She's in her eighties. She remembers this vividly, changing classes from the nice lady who looked after the babies, to the master's classroom next door where he'd bate the shite out of the kids. So there was little room for personalities at all in these classrooms. But in our day, by the 80s and the 90s, you could get fairly fresh with a teacher because there wasn't an awful lot they could do to you except screeching and

shouting at you.

LYNN: And they're all probably standing there looking at you, thinking, *This is exactly why we used to batter kids*.

LISA: [Laughs]. This is why we can't have nice things! It's true. I did two-thirds of an arts degree at college. And when you're doing an arts degree, everyone asks you, *Are you going to be a teacher?* And you're thinking, I suppose!?! A couple of my buddies from college went on to do teaching, and it's fucking miserable. The tables have turned. It's really difficult for teachers now.

LYNN: Yeah. But I think that's because both the education system and teachers haven't really accepted the premise on which education should be formed within the classroom. We haven't moved far enough from that authoritative classroom yet. Teachers are still trying to assume authority over a classroom.

I'm a big believer in Paolo Friere, in the equality of the relationship between the student and the teacher. One of Jordanne's teachers, Mr. Byrne, is a perfect example of where we need to move in terms of creating that culture. He's an English and a History teacher. But he had enough creativity to be able to take those subjects – even at second level, knowing they had to meet a curriculum and get ready for exams –

and be able to make it interesting for kids, allow them to explore. You'd walk into his classroom for parent-teacher meetings and there would be 2Pac posters on the walls. He would explore English by connecting with what the kids were interested in. The common complaint is that teachers don't have time to this and that. But here's a teacher, in a school that has a huge amount of issues and challenges, doing it. Really, the problem is that teachers are burnt down, they're worn out, they're giving up. And they're reinforcing the inequality of education that exists in society. Because at primary level teachers work really hard on this. They get kids to think about their dreams. And there's obviously lots of great teachers out there but there's still too many at second-level undoing the aspiration-building of kids at primary level.

I think young people should have a lot more say in the classroom. There should be more opportunity to ask questions and engage in conversations. So instead of just that banking model of *I'm going to stand here, give you all this information, and you're going to be a passive receiver of that information*, schools should take the time to sit the students all in circles every day, engage in community-development-style discussions, where you can discuss things more equally. I think secondary schools should take on more of the principles of primary education – but obviously in that progressed way where you make sure to raise the bar on what you're providing them educationally. We keep talking about skills. Skills, skills, skills. They're important. But we should also be asking why does education exist? What is it for? Right now, we're just trying to create economic units.

LISA: That's exactly it.

LYNN: I was in France a few weeks ago with the Department of Foreign Affairs. I visited a lot of different education centres, prison services, and their voluntary military education service. At every single visit it was work, work, work. What about Rehabilitation? Transformation? Opening of the mind? Knowledge? Curiosity? Those things weren't spoken about. And I thought that is actually how Ireland is becoming – work will set you free. It's a real neoliberal, capitalist perspective. You're a worker



Bunglash, Co. Kerry.

first and foremost. Everything will be okay if you just work. And everything else about you doesn't exist.

LISA: I remember my career guidance at school. Here's me, the dreamy writer kid coming in, and the first thing I was told was is, *IT is good now, it's a real buzz sector*. There was no question of *What are you interested in? What would suit you best?* I think I mentioned journalism and he just went, *Ah no, that's really tough to get a job in*.

LYNN: I think they told Jordanne she should work in administration or as a secretary or something. She took one of these standardised questionnaires. It's supposed to be a measurement of their skills. But I had to ask, if they're coming out with guidance like that, what the hell is going on here? There's nothing wrong with being a secretary, obviously, but I know Jordanne loves the world of art. So how did they arrive at that conclusion?

LISA: But there you go, where's the employability in art? And I'm guilty of that myself, because I've a buddy who finished an art history degree recently, and I said to him – I was half taking the piss now – I said, *Oh, that'll be useful*. Instead of saying to myself

that maybe that is his great passion. What the fuck is wrong with going to university to learn something for its own sake, because you love it? Instead of always having to ask, What can I do with this degree?

LYNN: But that's because society is creating that attitude. It's not us.

LISA: I heard this morning that we're, what, the 6th richest country in the world right now [after Qatar, Macao, Luxemburg, Singapore and Brunei]. Are we? Okay.

LYNN: Imagine that. Who is rich? Rich for who?

LISA: It's a very strange barometer indeed. An

art history degree won't maintain that, will it? As a writer, when you go to different countries it's like, *Here's an Irish writer: celebrate them!* As if you're a unicorn or something. When they start talking about languages, that's where I feel really, really stupid. I did five years of French, and five years of Spanish. And I barely have words of either. Part of the reason is that I didn't practice them after school. It's like a muscle, so it's on me as well. But I was trying to explain to other international writers that languages are taught in Ireland out of a book, by teachers who probably don't have the accent. You're there going,



Shanvaghera, Co. Mayo.



wee, bee en sewer. Well, I should say that I actually had quite a good French teacher, so quite a lot of this is on me. When these other writers say, *So you don't speak another language?* You're like, *Well, not really very well.* And then they ask: *Oh, but you speak Irish?* [Lynn laughs]. *Oh, a little bit, but not much now.* *An bhfuil céad agam dul amach más é do thoil é?* And they're like, *Aw, so beautiful.*

Owning Man United and Running an Ice Cream Van

LISA: I've a Leaving Cert student in the house this year, and it's all very fresh and terrifying.

LYNN: It's awful, isn't it? Jordanne was only 16 doing her Leaving Cert two years ago.

LISA: This one is 17. Only a few days ago I went into the bedroom. She said to me, *Mum you were right, I'm too young, I can't do this. 17 is still too young.* I was 16 doing it and that was ridiculous. I went off to university when I was just a few weeks after turning 17. And what do you think I did? I went feckin mad with the freedom, I just had the best time ever down in Cork.

LYNN: Mine didn't. She goes to college. And she's very structured.

LISA: I hate her [laughing].

LYNN: Don't! I would say she would have loved to go mad, but she had just gone 17 as well when she started the Trinity Access Programme. And now she's only 18 and she's finished the first year of her degree.

LISA: That's brilliant.

LYNN: Well, it is – it will be when she gets to the end of it. It's English and Film. But she loves the subjects. The youngest is now saying, *You know, I might go to UCD to study nursing.* And I'm thinking, *Alright, so the Trinity indoctrination is not yet complete?* This is how she's rebelling. I'm just glad this is what her rebellion looks like – it's so far from my rebellions. She initially began to rebel when she said, *I'm just going to drive an ice cream van and own a load of cats.* And I was there, *I haven't gone and worked my arse off for you do that.* And she was like, *Listen, please listen mam, the ice cream van would be my choice. I'm not being an ice cream van driver because I've no other choices.*

LISA: Mmmm. She's got you there.

LYNN: *So, I'm choosing,* she says. *Other people do other jobs because they have to, because nothing else is available to them, and they didn't have the opportunities. I'm clearly saying I don't want to go to college, I'm choosing to drive an ice cream van and*

have a load of cats. How can I argue with that?

LISA: My ambition was to own Man United. There's still time, there's still time! There's a lot of talk these days about stress and anxiety among younger people – do you feel or see the difference between our generation and theirs?

LYNN: I think it manifests itself differently from generation to generation. When I was growing up my stress manifested in quite negative outward behaviours. But I watched other children who left school very young because of the stress. It's less

him. The same kind of problems were there. We just packaged it differently.

LISA: A friend of mine, she remembered her granddad when she was growing up; she found him terrifying. He was very strange. And he would take to the bed for days. Looking back now from her 30s she's realised: he was fucking depressed. But he didn't have the language to say it, I'm depressed. This is the thing in my family – there's mental illness in us all the way down the line – but there was no way of describing it. For very affected people you ended up in a hospital, far away, and you wouldn't be talked about. With my kid now there's a lot of chat about anxiety, and then there's a lot of, *You wouldn't understand, mum.* And I'm there thinking, *Actually, I would, thank you very much.*

LYNN: We used to have the industrial schools. Now we're going through a homelessness crisis. So, really, all our generations are going to be looking pretty fucked up for years to come. We've just found new ways to institutionalise people without calling it institutionalisation. Now the streets are our asylums. They want us to think we got rid of asylums, and we integrated people into the community when we haven't. I've worked in the homeless sector for a long time, and I was working directly with



people that would have been institutionalised or been in asylums. They're just not in a big building that we can point at anymore. Instead they're on our streets, they're sleeping rough, they're in our hostel beds. It's the same with people seeking redress who spent time in industrial schools. These were poor people. Some mothers would give their children to industrial schools because they had no money. And now we're looking at kids in hotel rooms, sharing beds with adults. Teenagers having to share beds with their dads. Just because it's in a hotel doesn't mean it's not the same as what we were doing to people for all those years. The only thing that the previous generation have over us is access to a home. That's a big thing, obviously. Right now, we don't even have access to a home. But that institutionalisation is still very prevalent. ■



Former footballer and current Poet-in-Residence at Bohemians Football Club, **John Cummins** recounts his development as a footballer which coincided with a secret and growing passion for poetry. He takes us from Darndale and Coolock to London and Munich, then home again. His story is set alongside stills from a short film, *Zozimus*, on the Bohs-Rovers Derby in 2018 directed and produced by **David Knox** and **Jamie Goldrick**.

Darndale to Highbury, Munich to Dalymount

GROWING UP In Darndale, where I lived till the age of eight or nine, the houses backed onto each other to create a square – a natural concrete arena. One of these squares was only a minute’s walk. You could go alone or go to join a match – *first to 20* kind of games, *World Cup* (always Ireland, me!), *3-and-in*, *heads and volleys*, *football tennis*. Then we moved up the road to Moatview – a 1980s housing estate in Coolock – brick, concrete, white-painted goals on side walls. Not too many parked cars getting in the way. Moatview was still partly a building site when we moved in. A football was more precious in those days. A good ball was a seldom kicked thing. Plastic on the brick, leather for the grass, though the leather always found its way onto the brick.

+ **Holy Show Extras:** Catch the 18-minute film and hear the extraordinary electronic score from Mantle at holyshow.ie/extras

FIRST RHYMES My first introduction to poetry was the same as every other child, nursery rhymes. I realize now that they’re our first introduction to rhythm and poetry – the oral tradition. The words ‘poetry’ or ‘poem’ weren’t part of my childhood vocabulary. I’d never heard of a poet. Never saw one. Wouldn’t have known of their existence. It wasn’t until secondary school that poetry started to have real impact in my life. Miss Bourke, our Leaving Cert English teacher, was solely responsible. She brought the poems on the page alive and into the classroom. Patrick Kavanagh. I loved him. He got into me and I got him.

*The bicycles go by in twos and threes -
There’s a dance in Billy Brennan’s barn to-night*

.....
Around this time I started to scribble, dabble. Miss Bourke was so encouraging and introduced me to a living poet – Pat Ingoldsby. When I was a kid, Pat had presented children’s programmes on TV. I never knew he wrote. Miss Bourke gave me one his books, dog-eared a page, told me it was similar to one of my own teenage poems. I wasn’t alone. I was 15, 16.



There were others like me. Others wrote poetry. It wasn't until a few years later when I spotted him on the street selling his books that we finally met. I was 19 then. Both Pat and Miss Bourke encouraged me in my pendeavours. Perhaps poetry was something that people did.

PATRIOT GAMES Live matches on the box were a rare thing too. FA Cup Finals, an Irish international maybe, and World Cups. The first World Cup I remember was Spain '82. Gerry Armstrong with a winner for Northern Ireland against Spain, in Spain. Tardelli in the final – we all did that celebration! Running back up the pitch, half screaming, half crying, madness in our eyes. Mind you, celebrations were different, too. A raised hand after a screamer. An air punch after a late winner.

Those were days when, after watching a live game on the telly, you'd have this excitement in the pit of your stomach. It would build and build until the final whistle released you to run around the road and re-enact in your head – complete with the commentary – all the goals and action you'd just witnessed on the box.

Those were days when, after watching a live game on the telly, you'd have this excitement in the pit of your stomach. It would build and build until the final whistle released you to run around the road and re-enact in your head...

In 1986 I was 13. An impressionable teen. That World Cup was special. Everyone was Maradona. Playing our own games of World Cup, there'd almost be fights over who was Diego. You'd be Ireland, but also Maradona. He was a leftie like me.

ON FAMILY There were six kids in my family. Four sisters and one brother. There's 14 years between the oldest and the youngest, with me fourth in line. My mother is amazing. We never lacked love nor nibbles. How she did it all is one of life's great mysteries. Simply stunning. An inner city Dub. A Moore Streeter.



A Mary's Mansioner. The most selfless human being I have ever known.

I had a father who didn't know how to be a father because his father didn't know how to be father. A proud man. A man of habit. A kind but tough man. A Cabra man who was a Cabra boy in the late '40s and '50s. Our relationship was only okay when I was a kid. You'd be afraid of him a bit. As we aged, our bond grew tighter. He was a non-hugger who became a brilliant

embracer. I miss him now.

Manchester United was my Da's team and became mine from an early age. I was a real fanatic. Posters plastered the bedroom. Stats in my head at the ready. This was during the 80's and Liverpool's dominance. I loved them too, but there was no way I could or would admit it. The way they played the game, though. Posters of some Liverpool heads made their way onto the walls, once they weren't wearing the

Liverpool kit. Kenny Dalglish in a Scottish jersey alongside Paul McGrath, say. Or John Barnes caught in mid-dribble sharing cellotape with Norman Whiteside. Ireland, of course. Celtic, of course. Red and green dominated the walls.

In '88 I was doing my Inter Cert. Our first match against England and we won! I'll never forget my Da's dinner hitting the ceiling and dripping from it while we embraced, celebrated wildly – the whole

family, the whole road, the estate; that all-joyous, all-consuming pride.

In 1990, I was doing the Leaving. Certain fixtures were far more important than certain exams. At 16, almost 17, I still had the goo to 'do the do' out on the road after taking in a game on the box. I had to kick a ball, any ball, anywhere, with anyone, until the feeling, the desire to play, was satiated.

BOY ON TRIAL One week I scored four goals in a local club game and before I knew it I was on my way to London for a trial with Arsenal. Surreal. I was nervous, of course. Excited. Apprehensive. It was a bit of a blur to be honest. As if it was happening to somebody else.

I packed my notepad and pens, though. Shin guards and boots down one end of the football bag; poems, pages, and pens (and smokes) down the other. Never the twain shall meet.

This was 1991. I remember being collected at Heathrow. Three of us. Awkward teenagers. Strangers. We're in this car and on our way to our 'digs' – a family home for trialists and apprentices. The Arsenal rep was talking in his London accent. Pointing things out to us. I was quiet around new people. You couldn't get a peep out of me. I just took it all in – the volume of cars, the size of the roads, the width, the busy. The man brought us to a housing estate, a settled, quite lovely housing estate.

I was in the 'burbs. I got a grasp of the sprawl of London. A city to get lost in. I disliked it from the off. I couldn't settle. I'd blush when the lady of the house asked if I wanted a cup of tea. Crippled, I was. I think I wanted to leave as soon as I got there. I didn't fit. I was too young. Too inexperienced to cope.

There were a few good lads in the new set up – friendly, welcoming. Most were indifferent though, cold. I suppose we were all competing for the same thing. It was dog-eat-dog. A lot of Paddy this, Paddy that. Say 'thirty-three and a third', that type of stuff. The dressing room was loud, boisterous.

I wanted to stand out, but for the right reasons. I intended to keep my head down and let my feet do the talking. On my first day a gift of new boots from



my brother, Diadora Paolo Maldini – beauties – got ripped. I was mortified. They sent me across to the Boot Room to find a new pair. I'll never forget those few minutes walking around on my own, trying boots on for size. Like Cinderella. It was overwhelming. Hundreds of boots. All neat and tidy and polished. I borrowed (got to keep) a pair of Dave Seaman's, the Arsenal goalkeeper. I went back to the training session with a spring in the step. I knew then that this was serious.

The standard was high. The pace was fast. The tackles were furious. One touch, two touch stuff. I loved it. I understood what was being asked of me in training. I copped the drills quick. Each night I'd collapse into bed. I was feeling muscles I never knew I had.

So much of life in London was the same as back home – the same television and radio. But still, it didn't feel right, comfortable. This was probably all me, all in my little Coolock teenage head. The chat always involved the IRA and whether I was Catholic

or not. You felt it. John Major was PM. Another Tory after Thatcher.

Back at the digs I had my own little boxroom where I secretly penned my teenage inklings. Total secret. Writing was therapy. Is therapy. A way of figuring out the world. Making sense of it. Trying to find your place in it. Teenage angst. I still have them scrawlings. In me Ma's shed. In boxes. Boxes of boxes. Poems were a place to turn to when the homesickness kicked in.

I never had a dream of being or becoming a poet. I just wrote. I enjoyed it. I must have. It took years for me to come out of that shell. To share the pieces. In public I was John the footballer. In private I was John the poet. The culture of football – the dressing room antics of it – meant the two had to be kept apart. You wouldn't willingly put yourself out in the open to be slagged off. It was a long journey for me to arrive at a place where I became comfortable being both John the footballer and John the poet.

I was a brave, fast, skilful, with a tricky outside left. I was all left. I could put it on the proverbial 'sixpence'. I was confident in my own ability. I was a good talker on the pitch. I studied the game, and my game. Always trying to improve.

MY LEFT FOOT I remember being compared to Liam Brady by Pat Rice, the Arsenal Youth Manager at the time. The left foot. I was a brave, fast, skilful, with a tricky outside left. I was all left. I could put it on the proverbial sixpence. I was confident in my own ability. I was a good talker on the pitch. I studied the game, and my game. Always trying to improve. The post-mortem in the head. Should I have tracked back here? Lost your concentration there, John. And I was fit. Jesus, what I wouldn't give to be that fit again! It was intense. I was growing as a human, improving as a player. I was maturing.

Turning 18 I was on trial at one of the top clubs in football. I was realizing a childhood dream and yet I wasn't exactly happy. I was grand, don't get me wrong. I was fine, like. I just missed home a lot. People. Family. Friends. The warmth of people. The humour. The speech.

I often felt like an outsider. Maybe this was the proverbial chip on the shoulder. I had already noticed that the higher up you go in a profession, the more assholes you came across.

I seemed to leave London quicker than I'd gotten there. I remember walking in to the manager's office and asking something like 'Do you want me stay or can I go home?' I was there longer than originally planned. The next day I was on a flight back to Dublin! I was okay with this. I kind of forced it.

My Da collected me. He was really proud of me. He'd tell anyone who'd listen, 'This is my son, John. He was over at Arsenal there.' I never liked that. Always felt embarrassed. Rather than embrace it, I rejected my Da and his pride in his son. Childish, stupid stuff I regret to this day. I never owned what I had done. I'd deflect it in conversation, not big it up, blow it out of proportion.

I played for a few clubs around Dublin, but got more into coaching. I encouraged those who I felt were good enough to leave the area and play for Belvedere, Home Farm, Kevin's – clubs that played at a higher standard. Years later, two of the young boys off the road made careers out of the game. One became an Irish international. He always thanked me for the times we shared as youths on the road. I am proud of that.

GOING PRO IN GERMANY In June 1993 I met a German girl in Dublin and ended up in Munich. I was 19, almost 20. It took me a while to play in Munich. I had to wait for the paperwork to come through. Very German, this. There's no such thing as a banger in Deutschland. You need a Football Passport. That was a frustrating six months. I was raring to go.

Word got around about this Irish lad who could play. A team called 1860 Munich asked me to join after seeing me on the pitch. The German third division. I signed semi-professionally.

Munich was the real culture shock. Clean, organised, busy, affluent, punctual. Pedestrians waiting at traffic lights to cross the quietest of roads and no sign of a car for love nor money. Constant *prost-ing* over beers. Must make eye contact. It was big enough for me to be anonymous and invisible. I went there with no German. Picked it up as I went along. I blossomed more as a writer, began to experiment with other forms. Wrote plays, books, short stories. Wrote in German. Started to share what I had penned.

The German for Irish is *Ire*. One word for crazy in German is *irre*. I got called the *irre Ire*, pronounced *irra era!* I did find them a bit stand-offish, too, until



they got to know you, and then, once in, you were in. Their seriousness infuriated me at times but they were really welcoming. Patient with my clumsy German. Kind.

During this time, my mates were mates of my girlfriend. Fellow student buddies of hers: musicians, astronomers, academics, engineers. I was determined to learn their language.

It was like, *they know mine, I should get to know theirs*. I loved learning it. It's a fun tongue to speak.

I was 20, turning 21. In Munich, in football terms, I was getting old. I got a bad ankle ligament injury on my twenty-first birthday. That, perhaps coupled with my limited ability, scuppered the 'professional career' aspirations. Between this and more Football Pass issues it took me almost two years to get back playing. During that time, I guess I made my peace with the fact I wasn't going to score that winner against England. I delved into the writing. I was definitely starting to see myself as some sort of a scribbler rather than some sort of dribbler.



STEPPING UP AS A POET

I moved back to Ireland in 2004 aged 31, Dublin was abloom with the boom. Things I had seen on my travels were happening in my hometown. People getting into debt. Consumerism. Parked cars filled the streets. Now everyone had a motor of some description. It was more difficult for kids to kick a ball in peace.

I found myself back coaching and playing locally, and finally got to play a few games for Darndale. Along with my partner, my one-year-old daughter and my seven-year-old step-son we moved in with my parents to my old family home. To go from the shine and gleam of Munich back to the gloom and grit of Coolock was tough. It felt like a step back, yet without that familial support we would have been lost. Football helped me get through this phase.

Poetry took me out of it.

I didn't even glance at the 'poetry scene' till 2007. The Cellar Bar, watching, listening. Then in 2010 an overwhelming feeling of 'It's time, John' took over. What was I doing? Writing and not sharing? At the start of 2010, I went into The International Bar and the Glór Sessions. It took me another few months to go from the sidelines to the spotlight. Hiding behind a shaking page even though I knew the poem off by heart.

For example, if I knew I had a few minutes of a slot on a Friday, I'd wake up on the Monday with butterflies. I'd try to banish them before the foot even hit the floor, but during the days leading up to the gig they'd return, fluttering away in the belly pit, intensifying as gig kick-off approached. Over time,

The German for Irish is *Ire*. One word for crazy in German is *irre*. I got called the *irre Ire*, pronounced *irra era*! I did find them a bit stand-offish, too, until they got to know you, and then, once in, you were in.

after feedback and life experience putting things into perspective, these bouts of nerves diminished in scale and intensity. I still get some anxiety/excitement before I perform but it lasts nowhere near as long – a short, sharp burst just before taking to the stage.



THE BARD OF BOHEMIA

I've written preview-of-the-season-poems, review-of-a-match-poems, love poems to the stadium. But I don't have a remit as such. I write when the muse strikes. There are plans to re-develop the stadium – there are fans who have stories and memories to share. Dalymount is dripping with history. I've made it part of the remit to collate as much of this as I can during my tenure/penure.

There's material in the present day club too. It could be a poem about a ball boy busy keeping warm – a pass – a tackle – the flags – the moon as a ball – the growth of a certain player. And all the while I try to keep the piece within the framework of RAP – sixteen lines. If I can capture what the pen wants in sixteen, brilliant.

Sometimes I get the odd 'put that in a poem' comment from fans at Dalymount on a Friday night. Or 'keep up the good work' – positive, encouraging feedback. It's for them I write. I try to give them a voice – to their feelings and thoughts; maybe to give voice to those without one. Try to capture a moment for all time in rhyme.

The players have been brilliant, too – and the manager and staff. I try to praise and not complain. My role at the club is small in the grand scheme of things.

Poetry helps me make sense, find sense, vent anger, release sadness, lament, locate joy, celebrate. Without it I wouldn't cope with Dublin, in Dublin. I love this city. I love this country. It breaks my heart to see what is being done (or not being done) to our land and its people. I don't go around with my head in the clouds spouting Wordsworth or Yeats. I pick my poems up off the street, the fields...

*the boom is back and its back real bad, baby -
count them cranes – the amount of cocaine
is mad crazy -
increasing cost of living our century's Rising -
our human condition reduced to surviving
on a minimum wage in a gig economy -
butt ends of sad gags in a tragic comedy -
no luck with the landlord while searching
on the HAP -*

I'm morto the monto has got the golf clap...

from 'The Boom is Back' by Shakalak

I'd say, overall, it took me 20 years to get to the point where I could get up on the stage. I wouldn't wish that on anyone! I started with rhyme – left it, experimented, played around for a decade or so – returned again – in the realm of rhyme I remain. On good days, everything rhymes.



LIFE IN SHAKALAK

For a long time I have wanted to 'be in a band'. Writing and performing poems is a solo gig. It can be daunting up on stage at times. It's just you doing the verbal keepy-uppy. It felt like a natural progression when Shakalak came together in 2018.

Being in a band on stage is definitely different. You can pass the ball to your bandmate and breathe a while, admire, enjoy their way of keeping the ball afloat. You don't feel alone up there.

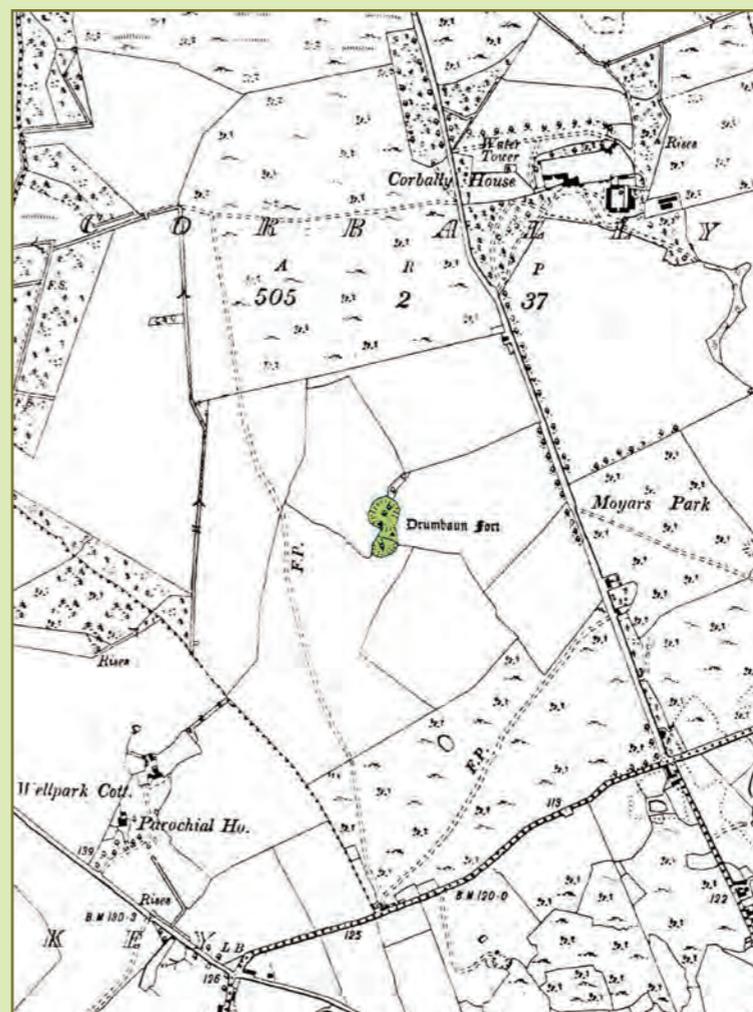
For me, rehearsal is training. Gigs are match days. There is a bond within the band that is similar to the bond within a team. The lads have taken it to heart. Perhaps they indulge me. Fin has a captain's arm band, worn by Iniesta of Barcelona and Spain. We pass it around between us from gig to gig. Gig Captain of the Day is responsible for the gear, punctuality and sound-check. It's a light-hearted thing but when it appears and the chat takes place, we all know it's time to put the head on and go out and give the best show we can. ■



The Other Crowd

A Conversation about Fairies

ASKEATON CONTEMPORARY ARTS RECENTLY PUBLISHED *Men Who Eat Ringforts*, a book about the destruction of fairy forts in Ireland. The book's contributors **Sinéad Mercier**, consultant on climate change and human rights, **Michael Holly**, artist, researcher and filmmaker, and **Eddie Lenihan**, author and storyteller, met to discuss aspects of fairy lore and belief, and to try to make sense of a nation hell-bent on the demolition of its own history in the name of progress. They were joined in conversation by artist and modern-day seanchaí, **Hugh Cooney**.



Sinéad Mercier



Michael Holly



Eddie Lenihan



Hugh Cooney

Here we find a fairy fort - an ancient dwelling place - nestled among modern houses. The imagery throughout this piece is taken from the book *Men Who Eat Ringforts*.

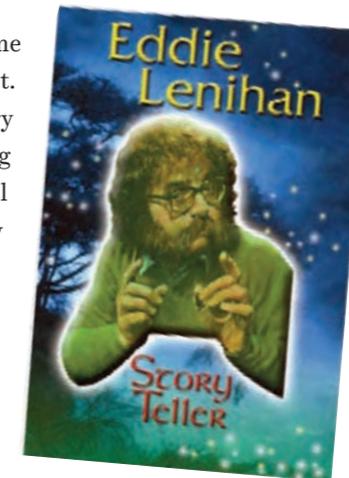


Above, a fairy fort as recorded on an Irish Ordnance Survey map. Below, the same fort photographed from above.

EDDIE: By way of introduction, let me lay a few facts about the Irish fairy fort. What has come to be seen as the ‘fairy fort’ was once upon a time a dwelling known as a ‘ringfort’, wherein a small community lived. To the best of my knowledge and understanding, these ring fort dwellings stopped being built around the year 1000 AD, in the 11th century. It had to do with the structure of society at the time. Things were happening that we’re still just guessing about. As the centuries passed, the origins of these ‘ringforts’ were gradually forgotten. But with so many of these strange things existing unexplained in the landscape, people wondered what they were. It was natural enough they thought these things must belong to some other, supernatural, force. And in the meantime, since that time and our time – since, say, the Middle Ages – people still had their belief in the other world, their belief in, say, the fairies.

The fairies are *na daoine maithe* [the good people], or *aes sídhe* [people of the fairy mound], or simply the *Sídhe*. Ordinary folk always respected the fairies. In my collecting of stories down through the years, older people didn’t tend to call them the fairies, especially when it came to the Irish language – they had many different names for them in Irish: *na daoine eile*, *na daoine vishe*. Older people speaking English might call them the middle people, the other crowd – names like that. There was always respect for them. And respect leads, a little bit, to caution. Sometimes to fear. And that is probably the reason why, in our folk stories, a central element of the fairy fort is its inviolability. You weren’t to trespass or interfere with it. Or you’d risk grave punishment and reprisals by the fairies.

MICHAEL: Where I grew up, in North Kerry, there was a fort down the road from me. And I grew up in a very rich pastoral landscape, a lot of dairy farming. You were chased by farmers no matter what field you went into, so the fairy fort was actually the only place you could go to play. There were two of them; one further away, one closer. Me and my pals liked going



there. They were these separate spaces that weren’t considered farmland; you weren’t trampling on grass or crops or that. I mean, of course there was the superstition around them.

EDDIE: I suppose you got away with it so?

MICHAEL: Well, you know, looking back on my life... maybe I didn’t. [Everyone laughs]. But anyway, working with Eddie, and the essay you wrote, Sinéad, for *Men Who Eat*

Ringforts, I was really reminded of that place in my youth. The first fort me and Eddie went into, when we were going around investigating the different places, was near to Ballycasey. I was struck by how these forts really are special locations, with their own unique atmosphere. The fort in Ballycasey isn’t far out of the way of things at all, but when you get near to it, and go into it, it seems so distant from everything else. Amid a few old trees and bushes, there’s somehow this feeling of another world. It really is remarkable; and it’s something that was consistent in almost all of the forts we visited. They were really pleasant places to be, in an otherwise largely industrial landscape.

SINÉAD: There is something to these spaces. The sites themselves have a special ambiance – call it magic or natural aspect or whatever – but it’s something we can’t quite understand. And this idea goes to the root of the old Irish way of seeing the landscape.

Comparing the Irish word for the environment with the English one is very interesting. The English word ‘environment’ is based on the word ‘environ’, which means a surrounding: this frames nature as something that is around us but it ultimately separate to us. While the Irish word, *comhshaol*, means the ‘lived-in life’. This is why the law has such trouble protecting the environment – and partly why our environment is in the state it’s in. Trying to protect the legal subject of the environment is impossible, because we humans have no subject-object relationship to it: it is us, it surrounds us, fills us. And that’s why I think fairy forts are so significant. They are like ripples in the ‘lawscape’,

The English word ‘environment’ is based on the word ‘environ’, which means a surrounding: this frames nature as something that is around us but it ultimately separate to us. While the Irish word, comhshaol, means the ‘lived-in life’.

disrupting the currently dominant view of the world. Be it through the ordinance survey maps, the boundary commissions or different instruments of property law and private ownership, law has re-written all the land around us in its own language. And fairy forts are weird bumps in the law’s perfect grid system – picture something like that movie, *Tron*. And the forts are like these black holes in the supposedly perfect system. The law can’t cope with fairies!

Whether you call it fairies, or you call it animism or superstition, people do believe in what they represent, they believe there is more to the world than we know, or we can know. The law claims complete knowledge and control. But you don’t have to control everything, some things in nature and in life are better left to be. And if you attempt to control and circumscribe all of nature, you often end up doing so in a way which fails to capture its essence, which in turn leads to bad law that actually harms the thing you seek to protect. In fact, what I found in my research was that the more the state tried to protect these sites within the legal framework that exists, the more they enabled their destruction. There is a very distinct way of seeing in the law. When environmental legislation was enacted to protect these fairy forts, they only referred to them a ‘ringforts,’ even though everyone knows them as and refers to them as fairy

forts. I found that very revealing, and I think it spoke to an inherent problem in the law, and in environmental law in particular. You can’t protect something that doesn’t exist – and this idea of the fairies, this association people make about the sites, is invisible as far as the law is concerned. These places are ringforts, of historical significance because of their age, and nothing more. There is this other thing – this idea about the other world, the possibility of something else – which is lost.

WHEN FAIRIES STRIKE BACK

EDDIE: We need to show proper concern at a national level. I know I got a bit of notoriety some time ago when I managed to preserve a whitethorn bush in Clare. But, as I always say, I’m not any kind of campaigner. The fact was I had been passing that way every day

for years and years. I heard about that bush from older people – because I have been collecting folklore for over 43 years now – and they always told me it was a fairy bush. Then one day while I was passing I saw the diggers and I saw the workmen, and I stopped and I asked, and they told me that the new road was going that way. I asked what was going to happen to the bush, and the workman knew nothing about it. So I told him that was a fairy bush. Of course that meant nothing to him.

Then I decided to write into the *Clare Champion*, and I contacted Clare FM, and soon the Pat Kenny Show picked up the story. And then a *New York Times* reporter in Dublin got in touch with me, and came down here. He was a big stout man, I remember him well, and he took notes and took photos of the bush, but I knew right enough he didn’t believe me. He came

for a Paddy-leprechaun story, for the Irish-American readership of the paper.

MICHAEL: There was all sorts of goings-on along at that M18 site. When myself and Eddie were driving around Clare visiting different sites, he pointed out this fort just north of Crusheen that had been chopped in half by the M18 motorway. Eddie had heard from a local guy that there was an unusual amount of accidents on that particular stretch of road between Crusheen and Gort. And this local guy suggested the reason was that the fort had been interfered with.

So we went to investigate, to have a look at the place, take a few pictures. I started to do some research and it turned out there was a pretty elaborate archaeological excavation that took place when the motorway was being built. Then I got in touch with the National Infrastructure of Ireland, now the NII, and placed



Eddie hunting for a fort in Clare (photographed by Michael).

a freedom of information request with them about accidents in the area.

Well it turned out what Eddie had heard from the local was no lie: there'd been a huge number of incidents. The NII had done an engineer's report on the issue, and it turned out that the reason why there were so many accidents on this road is because there's a micro climate in that area that causes freak hailstorms. They sent me a spreadsheet showing me every accident that happened since the road was built, and sure enough there were many, many hailstorms involved. And while they could record these incidents, they had no explanation for what caused the storms in the first place. They didn't occur anywhere else nearby, just in the vicinity of this bisected fairy fort.

SINÉAD: Now that sounds like it could be the work of the fairies!

EDDIE: After I raised awareness of the the fairy bush on the M18, while that road was still being built, the bush was vandalised. In fairness to the roadworkers they had built a little palisade around it – to protect it from any damage caused by construction. I remember there was quite a bit of resentment about the bush causing trouble, inhibiting local progress, that sort of thing. It just came down to money. Thankfully the bush survives to this day.

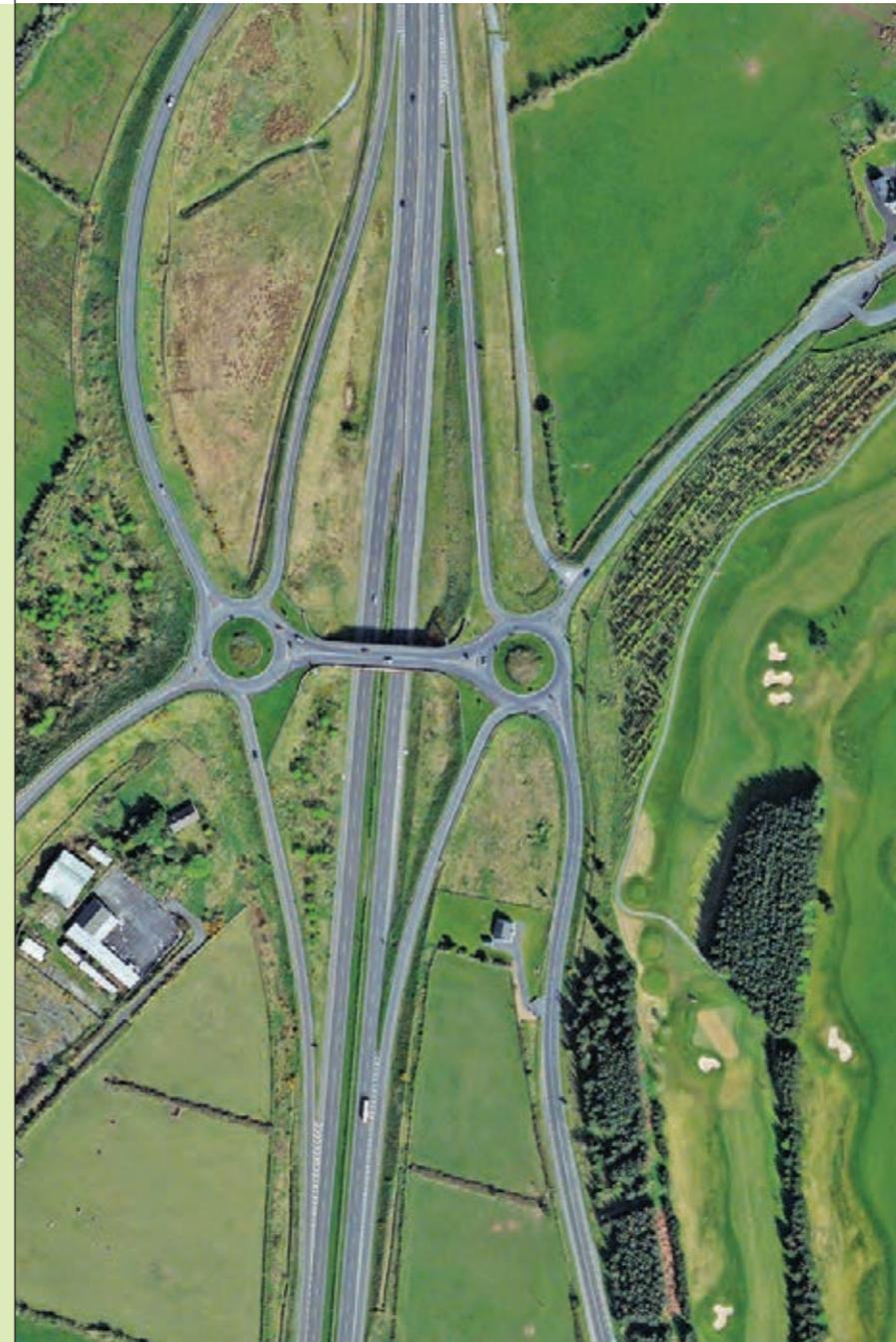
HUGH: What I find really interesting about that is, it seems that somehow the bush has managed – with

your help – to find a protected space. Amid the rushing roadway, you can hardly access it at all now. It's found its own isolated zone.

EDDIE: Well there might be no hailstorms or accidents on that road if they'd left it alone in the first place. The same thing happened below in Ferenka, in Limerick. A steel cable factory was to be built in Ferenka in 1976. They promised 1,200 jobs. And they shifted the fairy bush that was in their way – despite

DATE	ROAD	DIRECTION	BETWEEN JUNCTION	AND JUNCTION	MP	ROAD SURFACE CONDITION	CATEGORY	CALLED	TYPE
19 December 2013	M18	Northbound	15	16	MP 48.9	Hail/Sleet	3	15:32	Road Traffic Collision
19 December 2013	M18	Southbound	16	15	MP 47.8	Hail/Sleet	2	5:20	Road Traffic Collision
19 December 2013	M18	Southbound	16	15	MP185.0	Hail/Sleet	2	7:45	Road Traffic Collision
19 December 2013	M18	Southbound	16	15	MP 48.15	Hail/Sleet	1	15:32	Road Traffic Collision
22 December 2013	M18	Northbound	15	16	MP51.8	Hail	2	3:39	Road Traffic Collision
24 December 2013	M18	Northbound	15	16	MP 40.0	Hail	3	8:03	Road Traffic Collision
29 December 2013	M18	Southbound	15	14	MP 53.0	Hail	2	7:45	Road Traffic Collision
12 December 2014	M18	Southbound	16	15		Hail	3	9:50	Road Traffic Collision
10 January 2015	M18	Southbound	15	14	MP 55.2	Hail	2	19:59	Road Traffic Collision
13 January 2015	M18	Southbound	14	13	MP 55.7	Hail	2	8:00	Road Traffic Collision
23 February 2015	M18	Northbound	15	16	MP 44.5	Hail	2	1:12	Road Traffic Collision
03 March 2015	M18	Southbound	15	14	MP 44.5	Hail	1	20:45	Road Traffic Collision
28 April 2015	M18	Northbound	11	12	MP 68	Hail	3	11:30	Road Traffic Collision
28 April 2015	M18	Southbound	12	11	MP 68	Hail	2	11:30	Road Traffic Collision
24 December 2015	M18	Southbound	16	15	MP 45.8	Hail	2	15:45	Road Traffic Collision
07 January 2016	M18	Southbound	16	15	MP 49.25	Hail	2	11:47	Road Traffic Collision
09 April 2016	M18	Southbound	16	15	MP 41.5	Hail/Sleet	3	14:40	Road Traffic Collision
09 April 2016	M18	Northbound	15	16	MP 42	Hail	3	15:00	Road Traffic Collision
17 November 2016	M18/N18	Southbound	16	15	MP 50.7	Hail	2	12:00	Road Traffic Collision
17 November 2016	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 50.7	Hail	4	12:00	Road Traffic Collision
26 February 2017	M18/N18	Southbound	16	15	MP 50.7	Hail	4	20:20	Road Traffic Collision
21 March 2017	M18/N18	Southbound	16	15	MP 45.5	Hail	3	7:15	Road Traffic Collision
21 March 2017	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 45.3	Hail	2	7:45	Road Traffic Collision
21 March 2017	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 45.8	Hail	2	7:00	Road Traffic Collision
21 March 2017	M18/N18	Southbound	16	15	MP 40.4	Hail	1	9:20	Damaged Road Restraint System
21 March 2017	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 38.8	Hail	2	10:00	Road Traffic Collision
24 November 2017	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 49.6	Hail	3	9:10	Road Traffic Collision
16 January 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	14	14	MP 58.5	Hail	2	10:30	Road Traffic Collision
16 January 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	15	15	MP 52.6	Hail	2	14:00	Road Traffic Collision
16 January 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	16	15	MP 44.1	Hail	2	16:45	Road Traffic Collision
16 January 2018	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 45.5	Hail	1	17:00	Road Traffic Collision
16 January 2018	M18/N18	Northbound	14	15	MP 53.8	Hail	2	14:20	Road Traffic Collision
18 January 2018	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 51.5	Hail	2	9:40	Road Traffic Collision
18 January 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	16	15	MP 56.2	Hail	1	18:10	Road Traffic Collision
18 January 2018	M18/N18	Northbound	15	15	MP 53.0	Hail	2	19:15	Road Traffic Collision
18 January 2018	M18/N18	Northbound	14	15	MP 54.0	Hail	4	20:00	Road Traffic Collision
19 January 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	15	14	MP 56.6	Hail	2	8:20	Road Traffic Collision
19 January 2018	M18/N18	Northbound	14	15	MP 57.82	Hail	1	8:45	Road Traffic Collision
18 January 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	15	14	MP 52.8	Hail	2	19:25	Road Traffic Collision
19 January 2018	M18/N18	Northbound	14	15	MP 57.7	Hail	1	8:30	Road Traffic Collision
18 January 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	15	14	MP 56.25	Hail	2	21:26	Road Traffic Collision
31 January 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	17	16	MP 36.0	Hail	2	14:40	Road Traffic Collision
15 February 2018	M18/N18	Southbound	15	14	MP 56.0	Hail	2	20:53	Road Traffic Collision
29 March 2018	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 48.5	Hail	4	19:28	Road Traffic Collision
02 February 2019	M18/N18	Southbound	15	14	MP 53.8	Hail	2	14:45	Road Traffic Collision
09 February 2019	M18/N18	Northbound	15	16	MP 48.0	Hail	1	17:16	Road Traffic Collision

The spreadsheet Michael received after his Freedom of Information Request with the NII. There were huge numbers of accidents on the M18 road that bisected the fairy fort, and an overwhelming number included unexplainable hail storms.



The location of the *sceach* (or fairy bush) the Eddie managed to save from the motorway – you can see how the motorway slip road was bent outwards to avoid the bush.

the warnings of people: city people as well as country people. But they shifted it. And you never shift a fairy bush. A fairy bush belongs where it belongs, simple as that. They dug it up, planted it elsewhere, and built the factory – but how long did that Ferenka factory last? About four or five years. Because everything that could do wrong did go wrong. They had strikes, they had union problems, supply issues. You name it. And the fairy bush is there, watching from where

destroy Lismullin Henge, Minister for the Environment Dick Roche, was held hostage by an armed gang. Martin Cullen, then Minister for Transport, was in a helicopter accident. And today the M3 motorway, built with a public-private partnership contract, costs the Irish state around €2 million a year due to underuse. Madness!

HUGH: That all reminds me of something from my own locality. Which probably involves the disturbance

Eddie had heard from a local guy that there was an unusual amount of accidents on that particular stretch of road between Crusheen and Gort. And this local guy suggested the reason was that the fort had been interefered with.

they left it, as if to say, lads, we'll be here when you're long gone. There are dozens and dozens of very recent stories like that, of people interfering with fairy forts and coming to no good.

SINÉAD: The same thing happened with Tara, when the motorway was built through it. In the 2000s the government decided to put a motorway right next to the Hill of Tara, probably our most important ancient Celtic site, the inauguration place and seat of the High Kings of Ireland. Well, like you say, Eddie, almost everything that could go wrong did go wrong. There were countless accidents on site. The signatory of the order to

of several fairy trees and several ring forts. I'm from Ballymore-Eustace, but it's very near to Blessington, Co. Wicklow, which is where the Poulaphouca Reservoir is. Even the name is telling: Poulaphouca means the whole of the ghost, the whole of the puca. There used to be a beautiful waterfall there, but they've built a dam above it, and now it's actually dangerous to go down to where the fall was. There was once a townland in this valley, but, I think it was in 1940, the government decided to evacuate the place and flood the whole valley for use as a reservoir – and this townland is buried underneath the water still.

I just remember as a child how dangerous the lake was. There was a summer where over 20 people died. And I remember a specific advertisement released about not swimming in Blessington Lake, with Ray Darcy talking to you. There was one story from the 60s about a busload of German tourists. They were coming back from Wexford late one evening. Their driver stopped near Poulaphouca to go to the toilet. The tourists were waiting, and waiting. And he was never seen again. I've only started to scratch the surface on this, but

it seems like there are some stories out there about the lake. And I'm going to take a leaf out of your book, Eddie, and start collecting them.

EDDIE: These things are worth looking into. It's foolish to dismiss the possibility of other natural phenomenon out of hand, as if we know nature through and through. Holy wells are another one like the fairy forts. You could say that holy wells are just a load of nonsense, now that medicines of all kinds have come on the market. But I know a couple of people yet who have gotten cures at certain holy wells in Clare quite recently. Maybe the power of faith has something to do with our ability to heal. It's a mistake to think we fully understand ourselves, let alone the world around us.

MICHAEL: The way some people are carrying on in this country, there's such carelessness, arrogance really. Just like the nonsense with the Hill of Tara,

you have the goings-on at the Hill of Allen. This hill in Kildare was the seat of Fionn mac Cumhaill and the Fianna. The great warrior king was supposed to have been buried there. Well, in the 1990s, the government gave the go-ahead for Roadstone to start using the place for a quarry. And now there's a huge chunk eaten out the side of it – half of it gone. It's being used as aggregate for road paving, stuff that goes underneath the tarmac.

HUGH: Roadstone are in Blessington as well, actually. They're eating the back out of Glen Ding Woods. And it has a fairy fort on the top of it. They're doing it in such a way that the hill has its facade facing the town, with all its innards hollowed out. They're leaving just enough to keep it from collapsing altogether.

SINÉAD: What you're all saying goes to heart of a big problem in environmental law. Take the term 'sustainable development', which people use a lot now, as if it's the solution to all our problems. 'Sustainability' is actually all about retaining just enough of whatever natural thing you're using as a resource, so that it will be able to grow back, so that it won't totally

disappear. The idea is that you can continue taking and taking, so long as you leave a basic minimum behind you. It's like leaving nature on life support, instead of letting it be what it really is.

SAVED BY A SEANCHAÍ

MICHAEL: You won't like the sound of this. Maybe cover your ears. When they started digging in Kildare, they discovered these remarkably large human remains: Fionn mac Cumhaill was reputed to be a giant. They might have found his earthly remains and threw them aside – Ireland's great protector. Anyway. The end result is that Roadstone have more than likely been using the material from the hill to pave Ireland's roadways. Up and down the country we're driving around on this ill-gotten stuff. They nearly seem to be courting bad luck for the whole nation.



A sticker from the campaign to save the sacred Hill of Tara from a motorway in 2000s (which was unsuccessful).



The vandalised fairy bush, in its pallasade. It has since grown back to a healthy size.

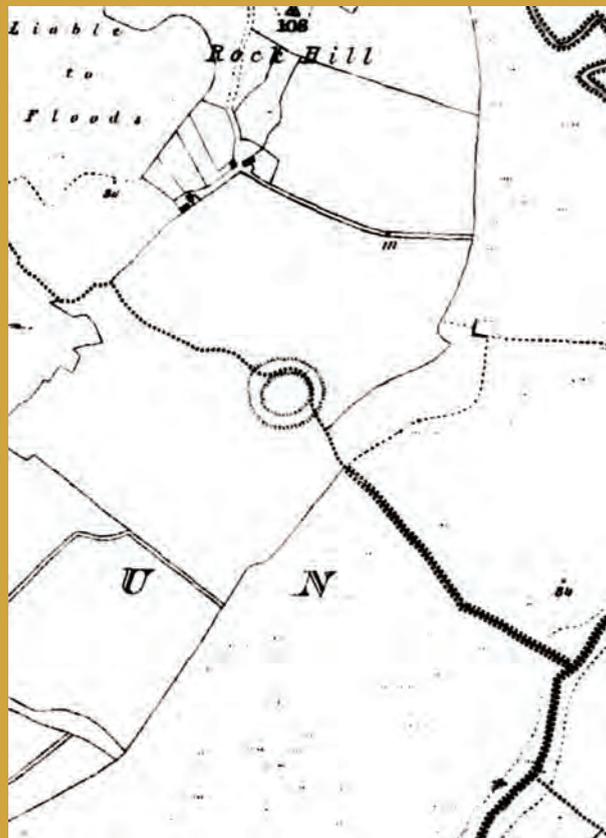
SINÉAD: When it comes to Ireland, and our heritage, it's like, so long as you have a few statues or interpretive centres here and there around the country – so long as you have a few statues of Fionn Mac Cumhaill, and an exhibit in a museum somewhere, you can go ahead and destroy the place where he actually lived and died. Keep the bare minimum, and get rid of the rich depths.

And, Eddie, I'm glad you mentioned the holy wells earlier on. They're a great example of an intertwining of sacredness or otherness with the everyday. For the most part, those wells weren't off in the middle of nowhere – they were spaces in the heart of communities, with the sacred liquid also serving as ordinary water, something to drink and to clean oneself with. That encapsulates the idea of the sacred as something to live with, every day. Here it is again: an *comhshaol*, the lived-in life. It shouldn't be something kept separate from our lives, notions and places that we visit only now and then. The idea of nature and wildness as being better thought of as something separate in our lives is actually an old colonial idea: separating a native populace from the things that bind them and give them meaning and

strength is the best way to control them. We've come to think of nature as a thing apart from ourselves, but this was not always so, especially in this country.

HUGH: I completely agree with that. In fact, this re-connection with nature is something that drives my work as a collector and teller of stories. A few years ago I started working in the National Leprechaun Museum. And let me tell you, the name lets it down, because it's an amazing folklore resource – it's not people jumping around dressed up as little green lads or anything like that. That's where I cut my teeth, learning about these stories, and telling them to the visitors.

As I become more aware of the environmental situation, you begin to realise that the old knowledge and reverence of certain spaces in the landscape, and thereby of nature as a whole, is really important; if we retain that attachment of magic to spaces and to nature, it can survive. And, Sinéad, to use your term about the 'lawscape', when these spaces change hands from person to person, when they're bought and sold, anything sacred or other isn't written into the property deed. Without any official record, this network of local knowledge and



Two more fairy forts, as captured by the Ordnance Survey, and by a camera.

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reverence and gratitude is disappearing. So I guess by collecting stories, and telling them, I want to protect what knowledge remains, and maybe help build that sense of magic back up again.

SINÉAD: If the seanchaí were storytellers who kept track of important information – laws, genealogies, literature – does your work make you a kind of modern seanchaí?

HUGH: That sounds a bit lofty! I mean, the thing you have to remember, that I have to remind myself, is that it's not just a righteous campaign, hitting people over the head with a message about what's important. At the heart of all this stuff is the element of entertainment. We're curious beings who love to play and joke – it's a whole package, you protect your world while you nourish your connection to your fellow human beings. There's a huge musical folk revival going on in Ireland at the moment. With it, storytelling and the seanchaí is coming more to the fore. And it goes hand in hand with the environmental crisis. So if that's what it means, I'd wear that badge no problem: modern seanchaí. I'd be honoured.

SINÉAD: It's kind of like you're all fairy forts [*Sinéad points to everyone in the group*]. Yeah, by virtue of being artists, or thinkers, by trying to foster another way of seeing, you're like the forts, like a 'clearing' in the lawscape. Law is the servant of capitalism, and capitalism knows only profit and loss – and it's especially blind when it comes to people like artists. When it comes to protecting what's good in life, capitalism and profit alone aren't up to the task. And, as an example – now I don't know if we'll put this in – but I heard that the Leprechaun Museum treat their workers quite badly.

HUGH: I was actually sacked. [*The group laughs*]. I'm a disgraced member of the Leprechaun Museum community.

SINÉAD: That's just it. You couldn't find a better person to be upholding the ideas of such a museum. Keeping the stories alive, getting them across to all kinds of people. They had a modern seanchaí and they bloody sacked him. And someone like you, a kind of absurdist comedian, couldn't be a better fit. Humour plays a big part in this. When people tell each other fairy stories, or give warnings about certain sites or places, they don't 100% believe in what they're saying. They say it in the Irish way: with a nod and a wink. You believe and you don't believe – you occupy that liminal space – the space of uncertainty. You ride on a kind of paradox. We can't know everything, and we don't need to. What we really need to learn is how to be more comfortable with that space of not knowing.

HUGH: As it turns out, my belief in the fairies has become a bit more concrete over the last while. I didn't always believe. But a while back – and this might be controversial – I consumed some magic mushrooms, at a fort site near my house. Up a tree, basically. I heard about a guy who corrected a stammer by taking mushrooms and sitting up this tree. While I was up there, the things that were coming in were just so real. There was a bush nearby, and I was being distinctly told by it to get out of there – I was having a proper conversation with this other character. Mad stuff. I had a vivid experience of the sacredness of nature and of myself. And I felt this overwhelming terror, felt like a baby, an innocent – and there was such anger – there was such forcefulness in this voice. I tell you I was glad to be away up that tree when I heard that fairy fort speaking.

I know there's been more research in the potential for responsible use of these natural substances in correcting behavioural and psychological stuff. And it's getting more credence medically. Do I recommend



going up a tree? I'm not sure. But it really cemented my belief in the Other Crowd.

EDDIE: Jesus, that's a story itself alright. But when it comes to collecting, let me give you a fairy-style word of warning: it can be tricky enough these days. Usually, when I want to know something about a fort, I'll walk to the nearest farm, knock on the door, and ask a few questions. This approach has served me very well for many years. But more recently, and especially when Michael and myself were tramping around the place, we got very little information about the forts from the people living nearby.

We sometimes got little more than a name – oh that's Murphy's fort or O'Brien's fort – and no hint of an Irish language version. And it's the Irish names that can really give you an idea of what the stories might have been behind the forts. All those names are practically gone now. It just shows you how those traditions have eroded. Thirty years ago I could have got those stories anywhere – and did – and I recorded so many of them. I'm actually going to do a second volume of *Meeting the Other Crowd* with these other

stories I collected. But the ones I missed are gone, they're gone. Things have so changed in Ireland in a generation and a half.

A FUTURE IN THE PAST

HUGH: I was listening to this podcast called 'Story Archaeology', by Isolde ÓBrolcháin Carmody and Chris Thompson, a storyteller. Well Chris has gone back and she's learned ancient Irish, and she's re-translating these old scripts herself. She's interested in *dinnseanchas* – the 'lore of places', the origins of place-names and traditions and events associated with a given location. I know that some of the bigger places in our landscape, like large rocks and hills, would have been more likely to survive through the ages in a recognisable form. But I wonder would there be a real struggle to connect smaller places mentioned in the scripts, and the knowledge of those places, to locations in modern Ireland? Might that be a way to recover the kind of knowledge that's been lost with the loss of all those stories?

EDDIE: It might. It could be something good alright.

Thirty years ago I could have got those stories anywhere – and did – and I recorded so many of them. I'm actually going to do a second volume of *Meeting the Other Crowd* with these other stories I collected. But the ones I missed are gone, they're gone. Things have so changed in Ireland in a generation and a half.

It's interesting the things that can turn up when you look for stories in a different way, through a different lens. My next book, *Military Memories*, is another volume of old stories that centre around the theme of military history. There's a lot from Cromwellian days – there's one person who'll be remembered for some time to come. Anyway, I started looking into stories around invasions and battles and the likes, and in little ways I found revealing tales about different landscapes.

To give you one example, I found one story about a British soldier who pissed into a blessed well. [Eddie laughs]. Here in Clare, I know the place. I know the well. It's only a story, but it survives three centuries later. He's supposed to have pissed into this well just to show [in an aristocratic accent] 'what he thought of Catholics'. Well something else that survives with the story is a mark on a nearby rock, about thirty yards away. It's remembered as the site on which he bled to death, right next to this place he profaned. Let's just say, he was dealing with the wrong well, the wrong Saint, when he carried on that way. So some stories, though they might be lost in one way, might on occasion turn up in another form.

SINÉAD: I reckon official policy is also part of the problem. There's been a cultural shift, yes, but there's also an economic basis, about what's being prioritised. I'm from Connemara, the Gaeltacht, where Irish is in decline. People say this is happening because the language is just too old fashioned: but the main reason is there's no jobs in the area to keep the Gaeltacht going, or to make it grow. And it's the same with fairies and

the other ways of seeing – it's not just a general slide; deliberate decisions are being made. The government hasn't done a comprehensive survey on the status of any of these fairy forts since 1998, and even then it was only done on 1.4% of all the ringforts on the island.

Our heritage structures are being worn away, and only the ones that can make us money are preserved. Since our colonisation, we're still struggling to get out of the world view that was imposed on us. We tried to use Catholicism to define ourselves. And we need to find a new way of seeing things. And I think the fairy fort is part of that, a way to find real solutions. Can we imagine an economy that allows for the otherness of fairies? Wouldn't that be a better system, truer to our natures?

MICHAEL: One example that didn't make it into *Men Who Eat Ringforts* was the case of developer Sean Quinn and his megalithic monument in Cavan. His attitude sums up the whole issue. The Quinn Group were quarrying on the Slieve Rushen in Aughrim, Co Cavan, and they found this monument, which dates to 2000 BC. It was reconstructed on the grounds of the one of his hotels in Cavan. It doesn't matter to these people where the thing is from or what it means, but only how you can make money from it.

EDDIE: He'd probably say to you, oh it's safer here. And look what happened to him since, bankruptcy and the rest of it. It would never occur to him that the tomb belonged where it belonged. Just like a fairy bush belongs where it belongs where it belongs. ■

Men Who Eat Ringforts is published by Askeaton Contemporary Arts and is available to buy from their website, www.askeatonarts.com for €15 (+€3 postage).

+ **Holy Show Extras:** To listen to some additional audio recording from this conversation, visit: holyshow.ie/extras

ESCAPE FROM BERLIN

Roisin Kiberd's Lockdown Diaries

ILLUSTRATED BY ROBERT MIROLO

IN A YEAR MANY OF US WOULD RATHER FORGET, acclaimed essayist **ROISIN KIBERD** wanted to record and remember. Getting anti-body tested in a sex club. Crossing borders before they shut. Finding solace in video games, killer ants, toothless sharks. And launching *The Disconnect*, her debut collection of essays about the internet, on a screen, in her pyjamas.

With unmistakable wit and grace, Kiberd captures what might otherwise have been lost, the texture of strange days unstuck in time, the ability to endure.



2

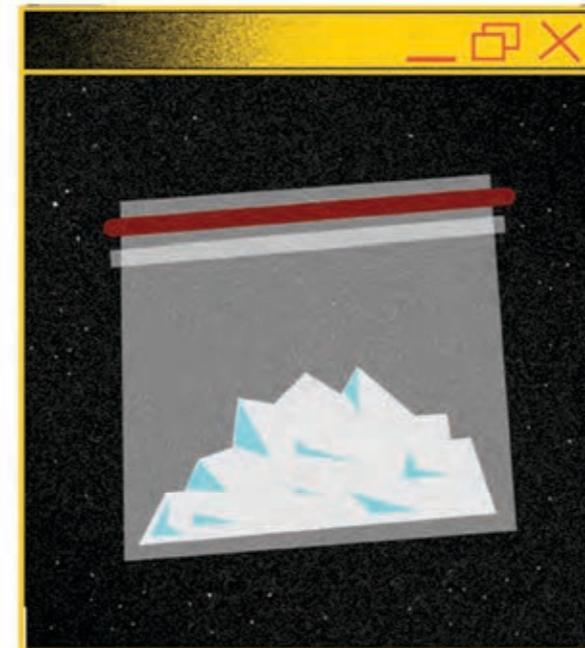
I begin this year with a swab in my nose at the site of a former sex club. This time last year, Rob and I would queue around the corner with friends, tipsy from cans of gin, dressed like exhibitionist replicants, waiting to pass the bouncers and begin what was, by all accounts, the greatest night out available on this particular plane of existence.

Now that same queue is socially distanced, anxious, watching each other for symptoms instead of checking out each other's clothes. I get to the gate and a man in a hazmat suit and a Russian hat hands me a form to fill out. A few minutes later the swab is deep in my nostril, scraping, the way they used straws to remove the brains when making mummies in ancient Egypt. This is my third time getting tested—there's almost certainly a microchip in there now.

There's something almost cruel about having to return to KitKatClub, dressed in a heavy winter coat, to be tested for the virus that has caused it and every other legendary venue in Berlin to go into hibernation. It's likely that many of the clubs won't survive lockdown—KitKat itself was about to lose its lease, shortly before the pandemic started. It's uncertain whether they'll find a new one, and whether somewhere this great, and this weird, could ever be replicated in another location. Words don't do justice to KitKat; I had some odd times here, but mostly unforgettable times.

The man doing the swabbing is genial. He seems familiar; I think he might have worked at the club when it was open. He asks me if I've done drugs or consumed any alcohol recently.

It was New Year's Eve last night, but I don't talk about that. The swab is comically long; one side is for the throat (I intone 'arrgghhhhhhh' as it mauls my larynx), and one side is for battering the nasal cavity. Afterwards I'm guided to the holding pen, a little yard off to the side that was once the club's dressing area.



I remember standing in this same spot a year earlier, watching a woman change wigs while her husband, on a lead, waited beside her. Now it's just concrete, and people waiting for *schnelltest* results. A woman to my left receives hers before me; 'Inconclusive'. I didn't realise that result was possible.

I've already quarantined for five days, as instructed by the German government. I kept to the rules until last night, when our friends Fern and Kieran came over. I cooked a tofu-heavy meal and we drank on the

balcony, toasting 'to antibodies!', and filmed a 2am Instagram video on Rob's phone of me reciting the SCUM manifesto, completely off my face (we took it down the next day). These days of isolation, added to the derangement of New Year's Eve, tipped me into a manic depression this morning. I need a negative result. I need the freedom to walk up and down Warschauer Straße in the snow, past the shuttered shop fronts, drinking takeaway coffee and absorbing the ten minutes of sunshine which manifest in

Berlin in winter each day. There's an element of guilt here, that leads me to think I have it coming. Maybe I caught the virus from my friends, or on the airplane back from Dublin after Christmas. Maybe I'm not hungover, but *viral*, and will soon lose my sense of taste and smell and any remaining capacity for joy in life.

This is always a concern these days, although at the same time, I'm fairly certain I was an early adopter, and had coronavirus in March last year. It felt like death; it required near-psychotropic doses of Benadryl Day and Night, and ventolin puffs every ten minutes. My family, too, are convinced they've had it—this was, at least in part, why they asked me to come home for Christmas. But who even knows how long antibodies last?

The 'inconclusive' woman looks nowhere near as worried as I am. She squints at the paper, another mundane argument for chaos, then nods, and the man in the hazmat suit goes back inside.

Time passes. It's the rapid-antigen test; I'll get my results in fifteen minutes. I heard from a friend, whose sister is a doctor, that the market value of each test is €7; here they're going for €25. I don't really mind; before I heard about the KitKat test centre, I paid €68 for a PCR test from Centogene ('THE RARE DISEASE COMPANY') out at Brandenburg Airport. A luxurious swab; it's apparently more accurate, but in this case the rapid test is all the government demands.

My thoughts stray to the people profiting from this crisis; the swab-makers, swab-administrators, swab-fetishists, anyone and everyone involved in the business of swabs. Perhaps, in a year or so, KitKat will re-open and this swab station will remain intact, a necessary precaution for entry to the club. I'd put up with it, to get through the door.

Finally the man in the hazmat suit appears and mispronounces my name. The paper says negative. As I leave, I pause to take a picture of the KitKat sign, still hanging over the entrance, synonymous in memory with so many nights out. It's red and studded with dead light bulbs. The letters spell out "LIFE IS A CIRCUS."

JANUARY

7

Last night our friend Alex-Alvina came over and we drank and talked about writing and terrible Tinder men. Somewhere through the second bottle of wine, Rob was told by a friend on WhatsApp to switch on the news, and we watched protestors storm the Capitol building in Washington. They looked like an army of tourists; phones held in front of their faces, novelty hats and Trump merch. I wondered how many of them were carrying guns.

Drink is a good way to immunise yourself against world-altering events; as I watched, it felt like some cataclysmic variety show; like symbolic vengeance, a *Mars Attacks* putsch. It was only this morning that I began to find the whole thing disturbing. I went for a walk in the melting snow and thought about America and its place in the world, about the debt, the poverty, the action film ideology, and the cosmic horror of its coronavirus response. I think I used to believe that if I read enough Don DeLillo novels, I'd begin to understand how Americans thought. I don't understand them. I'm not wholly convinced that they understand themselves.

My dad called this morning and wanted to talk, out of the blue, about 'cancel culture'. This, too, sent a chill down my spine. Where did he hear the term? I want to protect my parents from the internet, the way parents protect their children from the same thing.

JANUARY

12

Why read someone's diary? Why write one? It's an experiment I've tried several times, during certain periods, before dropping off. What I have stuck with, however, is keeping a notebook. Most days I make lists, I check in with myself, I write to unravel my racing mind. Very often I don't know if I'm capable of clarity until I have something on the page; redrafting and editing are where things come together. The essay, as a form, has always appealed to me for this reason. It promises some kind of certainty—'truth'—at its end.

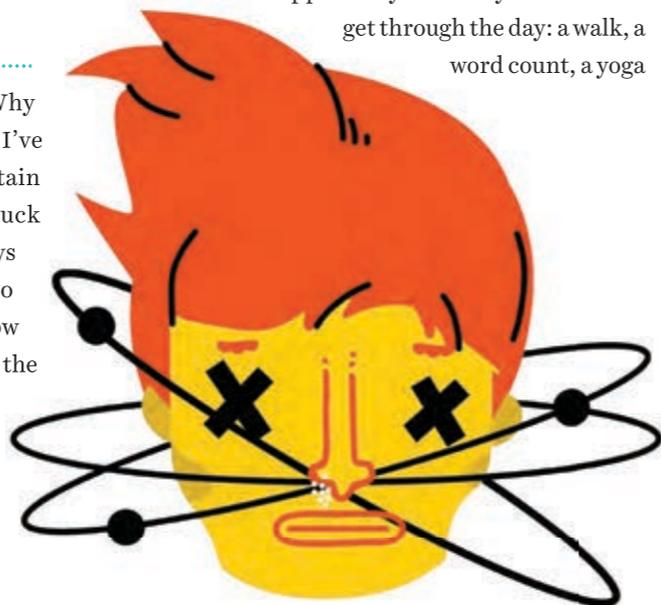
On the days when I'm *really* unhappy,

however, I don't write; I talk to my computer instead. I find somewhere quiet and open up QuickTime, and set it to record. I used to walk around Dublin at night mumbling into the Voice Recorder app on my phone, Agent Cooper-style (this was how a first draft of 'The Night Gym', in my book, was composed). It's an act of emotional bonding with technology. It's dystopian as hell, but it usually helps get my thoughts in order.

It's worth noting here that my thoughts are *not* in order, and haven't been since lockdown began. It's worse now than before; Berlin in summer, last year, was quite tolerable. The numbers were low, cafes and bars were open, and there were even a few outdoor parties, operating in what must have been a legal grey area. The minute the weather turned cold, however, the numbers went up, and now we're back in an indefinite lockdown.

These are lost days, and often bad days. I want to be honest, but I also don't want to burden readers with the task of understanding something I don't fully understand in myself. My emotions are more changeable and more fragile than ever; there's barely a day I don't think about killing myself, though I'm much better, lately, at identifying this as little more than a reaction, and allowing it to pass.

I take some solace in knowing I'll have written through this time warp, the shuttering and suspension of life. I've lost my sense of time, as has everyone, apparently. I set myself tasks to get through the day: a walk, a word count, a yoga



video. I've been trying to learn about cooking; I play videos of the Happy Pear twins shouting maniacally at a camera, preparing five-minute arrangements of chickpeas, then I go to the supermarket and buy the ingredients and follow the recipe. Ultimately, though, it's still chickpeas, whether it's with garlic or turmeric or both. The redistribution of matter. In a certain mindset, I give up on food, and variety, and life.

Sometimes our friends come over, a redeeming event, but in lockdown what was once fun has taken on a tangible darkness. Drinking, and drugs, in particular, serve a purpose if you have somewhere to go. Being stuck at home at two in the morning, watching your boyfriend depart the planet and wondering if the neighbours will report you for blasting The Plastic Ono Band too loud, is a lot less fun as experiences go.

We argue a lot, though we're good at making up. We're beginning to talk about leaving Berlin. What we're in now, I think, is a nothingness, a time I suspect I'll one day view as wasted, spent waiting for something to change, and believing increasingly that it won't.

JANUARY

30

It took two more swabs to make it out of Berlin; a €79 PCR test, at a pop-up centre in Mitte, and another *schnelltest*, demanded of us by KLM staff, at a tent set up inside Brandenburg airport. We filled out forms, waited for our test results, and eventually walked through the empty halls to catch our half-empty flight from Berlin to Amsterdam, then another to Dublin. The Netherlands has made two tests a requirement for entry, and there weren't any other direct flights available.

Once we got there, Dublin Airport was similarly desolate; halls of spectral pink light, and the solitary hiss of the baggage carousel. The free wine from the plane was wearing off. Waiting for our suitcases to appear, I weighed up the pros and cons of leaving, and what might happen if we'd stayed in Berlin instead. It seemed like we were spiralling inward, into our own minds, and into distortion.

After I got home, a news story appeared on my phone saying that the German government has introduced a ban on travelling to and from Ireland. It came into effect tonight, hours after our plane landed. I mailed the story to Rob, and he replied with a picture of Kurt Russell as Snake Plissken; 'Escape from Berlin.'

FEBRUARY

2

We're deep in the society of the gammy spectacle. Gardaí are posted at the road out of Ranelagh, not doing much, watching over a suburb of Googlers and Gaelgeoiri and new mothers with grown-out blonde highlights. The Gardaí don't seem to have a purpose here; they're just trying to remind us that they exist.

Berlin in lockdown was grim, but one thing I didn't have to think about there, at least, was the face of Micheál Martin. Now I see him everyday on the news, announcing nothing, cracking his beleaguered smile and asking us to do just a little bit more. The feeling he inspires in me reminds me of school, and being



subject to rules imposed by older people you don't like very much, but who claim to have your interests at heart. He's the nation's teacher, the one who probably isn't evil, only inane, and who tries too hard to be liked by the sixth year boys.

After thirty-one years of life, I'm still not sure what the purpose of Fianna Fáil is. They have yet to speak to me (the same, it's worth adding here, can be said of Fine Gael). Some part of me hoped that life would be easier when I got back to Ireland, but it's not. The awareness that I can't afford to live in this city is ongoing, and sometimes oppressive. Politicians and cheesy radio ads keep trying to turn the pandemic into a communal effort, an approach that might work were it not so horribly insincere.

My mother is one of the only people I've seen making efforts to create community and sharing during lockdown; she's evolved her own vision of society, which I'd describe as benign, matriarchal communism. She leaves boxes of old books outside the door for people to take, and offers lifts to the elderly, and walks sick people's dogs, and has taken to dropping off large containers of apple pie and beef bourguignon to my friend Emmet, who lives down the road.

It's a noble endeavour; my mother is always looking for someone to feed. As a lifelong vegetarian, and

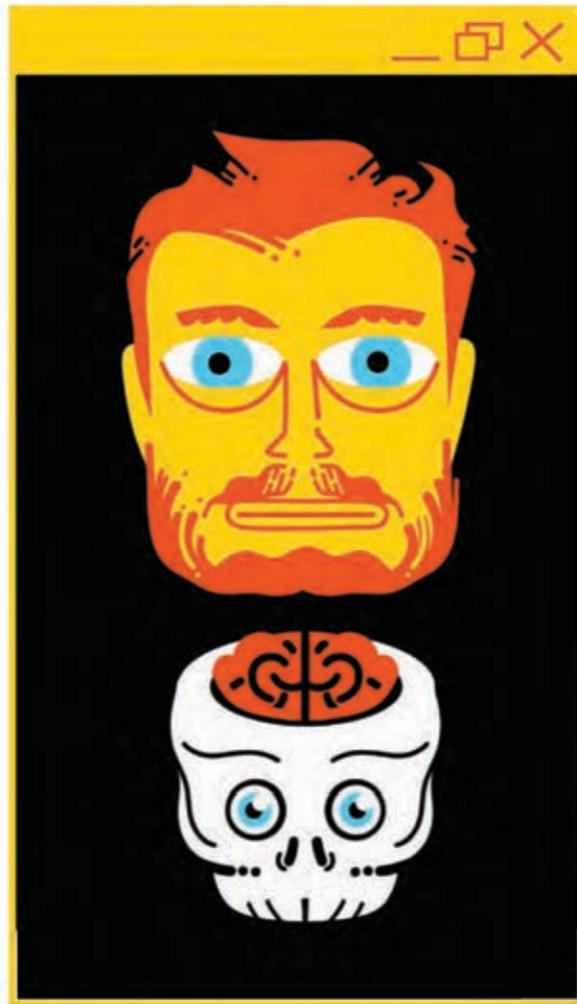
FEBRUARY

11

The book feels a lot more real now, after doing my first publicity. This morning I recorded an interview with Andrew Marr for 'Start the Week'. The other guests were Patricia Lockwood, whose novel *No One is Talking About This* launches this week, and Matthew Syed, who has a new podcast called 'Sideways'.

I possibly should have been terrified, but I found it fun. The producers were very BBC about it, sending me thirty pages of notes ahead of the recording. I got the sense I was in good hands. Occasionally Marr missed a line and would mutter 'I am talking absolute nonsense,' which was ridiculously charming.

After that, I had the first of twelve creative nonfiction classes I'm teaching at NUIG. I want to right



the wrongs of my own college education—I realise that I was very privileged in going to Cambridge, and Trinity, too, but I also found college intimidating as hell. Everything negative the supervisors said to me has remained with me for life, finding a place in the cloud of neurosis that routinely follows me around. For this reason, I really want to be careful and encouraging in how I teach.

After that, I did *another* recording, a podcast with a writer whose work I've been following for years. Again, it was fun, and much more casual. Possibly too casual; we got on to the subject of Armie Hammer, the *Call Me By Your Name* actor accused of cannibalism, and I almost certainly came off as feckless, and cynical. Maybe it'll get dug up at some future point and I'll be in trouble with the internet, or maybe by then Armie Hammer will have relaunched his career as a vegan, and won an Oscar, and no one will care.

FEBRUARY

18

I struggled when my book went up for auction, back in October 2019. I stopped sleeping, and walked around town in a daze, passing the time between calls with my agent. It should have been a period of happiness, even pride, but for some reason it wasn't, and this aimless, interstitial month before the book is launched is turning out the same.

There were a few things that helped in 2019 that I'm relying on now as well. One was cans of gin and tonic from Lidl. The other was video games; *Hotline Miami*, back then, and *Cuphead* now, both brutally difficult and loud enough to drown out my clattering thoughts. You probably already know *Hotline*; if you don't, it's a top-down shooter, its aesthetic a little vaporwave-y, full of pink neon sleaze and gangsters



wearing chicken masks. I played *Hotline Miami* so much during the weeks before my book sold that little pixelated M16s hovered behind my eyelids during the day.

Cuphead is very different, but equally challenging. It's mostly boss fights, animated in a style that replicates 1930s cartoons. Per the title, the protagonist has a cup for a head, and fights a succession of anthropomorphised vegetables ('The Root Pack'), a cigar-smoking German rat, a woman in a hoop skirt named 'Baroness von Bon Bon' *et al*, till finally you face the cartoon devil himself. There's a darkness to *Cuphead*'s childish aesthetic, reminiscent of the fairground scenes in *Pinocchio*. I suspect it appeals to the latent Catholic in me; at the end of every fight you win the 'soul contract' of your enemy, and eventually have a chance to free them all, after defeating Satan.

Sometimes at night I Skype with Rob, or read, or work on writing, but past a certain hour I allow myself to play games instead. They fill up my thoughts with noise and motion, and I'm able to obliterate my fears for a while.

FEBRUARY

20

A love letter to the internet-famous creatures getting me through this period of uncertainty:

The 400-year-old shark, five metres long and female, last seen somewhere in the North Atlantic. Apparently her species is still recovering from being overfished during World War II, and only reaches sexual maturity at the age of 150. She appears to be missing most of her teeth. Still, I imagine she doesn't suffer fools gladly.

The blood red ant, or *formica sanguinea*: these ants raid the homes of rival ants and kidnap their young, stealing the cocoons and raising them as their own. In evolutionary terms, these ants have lost the ability to feed themselves, so instead they train the 'slave' ants to forage for them. Occasionally they'll keep the queen of the rival colony alive until she has raised sufficient workers, then knock her off. *Formica archboldi*, another ant, are worth mentioning here too; they decorate their nests with the heads of their enemies.



Possums; the most memeable, unloved, unwashed, cat-imitating, tragic, campy, trash-dwelling creature, whose great talent in life is pretending to be dead. I love possums, dearly. I was thrilled when my brother sent me a possum mug for my birthday yesterday. It has a possum on it, and the motivational phrase: *IT'S CALLED TRASH CAN, NOT TRASH CAN'T!*

Statler the geriatric fruit bat, whose human carers carry him daily around a zoo in South Carolina, simulating flight as his wings are too frail. Statler is thought to be the oldest living bat in captivity. Watching him gaze lovingly with his one remaining eye at the vets—who have given him a new lease on life, despite injuries, arthritis and the venerable bat-age of thirty-three—is enough to restore my faith in this horrible planet.

MARCH

6 Things I have done so far to promote the book: sign 500 nameplates, some of them with 'Royzine Keyboard'; pitch stories on technology and the pandemic, technology and gender, technology and myself; stand outside being photographed on a day with a weather warning; lose sleep wondering how those same photos will turn out; speak to an Irish interviewer about Facebook, and an Italian interviewer about the soul; wait an extra twenty days for my period (I've taken two tests, both negative—it's stress); shop on Ebay for a secondhand dress—the fun part—settling for a black velvet Reformation number.

It feels odd to have this thing out in the world,

beyond my control, no longer belonging to me despite its content being so personal. Ever since reading Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', over ten years ago, I've been interested in this aspect of writing. Writing a book requires near-superhuman levels of immersion in one's own brain—a kind of egomania—but in the end it's an oddly selfless process. The minute it's published, it becomes someone else's to interpret and judge.

I wrote my intentions into *The Disconnect* itself; I wanted to reach out, beginning in my own experiences before broadening its perspective to the world around me. Doing publicity for it now, it's hard not to sink into doublethink; *be personal*, I've been told, but also, *millennial women write self-indulgently, and always about themselves*.

Another thing that worries me is my own lack of feeling. Right now I'm meant to have opinions; I'm meant to have everything to say about technology and loneliness and life. The truth is I've written that out of my system; there's a guilt behind those

promotional pieces, an awareness that I should be working on something new and completely different.

Still, I've told myself that I need to enjoy this. I will enjoy it. Only I can allow myself to do that.

MARCH

11 Recent days have felt dreamlike; a series of digressions, obstacles, entanglements, all leading to a single unavoidable event. I can't remember a fixed point when I knew for certain that the launch of *The Disconnect* would be online, rather than in real life, but it feels inevitable. It's going to be on YouTube, tonight, streamed live with comments rolling down the sidebar, the way I watch people play video games.

I have ambivalent feelings about real-world book launches. I enjoy them—they usually attract writers, and there's always free wine. On the other hand they're nerve-wrecking, intimidating, sweaty (there's rarely somewhere to leave your coat), and they usually attract writers and there's always free wine. It's very hard to get through one without saying something stupid I'll regret, in front of people I want to impress.

I guess my book launch has that advantage; you can wear pyjamas and drink whisky from a mug, and still be in attendance. It's going to be the most chill book launch, the most *aesthetic*.

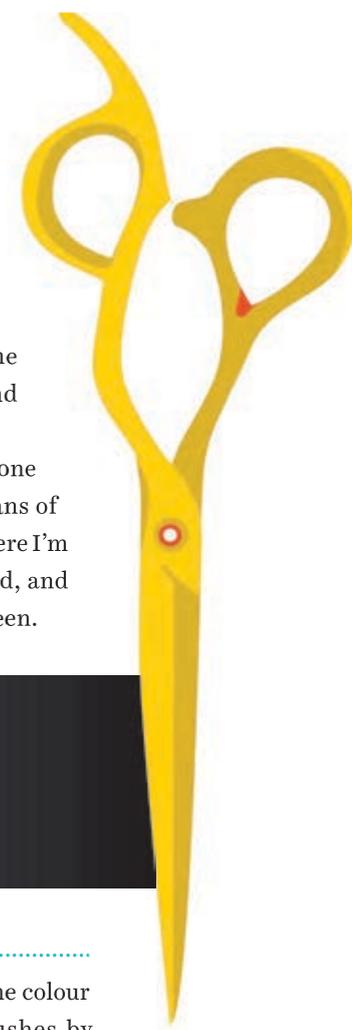
I turned thirty-two a few days ago. I'm doing exactly what I always wanted to do with my life, even if it's taken some messiness, and despair, and wasted time. Until now, I think, I've been afraid to allow myself feelings on all this; I've deliberately kept myself numb. It's hard to think in terms of years—in terms of a life, even, and the distribution of its meaning—but when I do, I tell myself I'm on track.

Now there are names flying down the sidebar,

comments and questions, people who seem to be having a good time. It feels like it was always going to be this way; an internet launch for an internet book.

I am become Brian O'Blivion from *Videodrome*; I live in the ether, a creature of signals and pixels.

I've drunk one gin and tonic, one glass of champagne and two cans of Monster Energy. I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be; elated, terrified, and seated, as ever, in front of a screen.



APRIL

5 Tonight the sky is the colour of amethysts. It rushes by me, stained occasionally with

lavender and peach, layered on sea and sand. The train journey from Dublin to Rosslare is surely one of the most beautiful in this country; even on misty days the landscape is infinite, a tapestry of shifting colours giving way to smoky white expanse. I film a video from my window but hesitate to post it. Travel is still mostly forbidden, and even though I have a reason for this journey I'm sure people will judge me.

The reason is the dentist. It's the first of three sessions which I'm paying for with money from the book. There's something very emotionally charged about dentist visits; they're a reckoning with the past, when I had multiple eating disorders and damaged my teeth. It's a weird cycle: spend years putting your body through hell, turn these lost years into a book, then use the money you earn to repair the physical

damage. In the days before the appointment I've had to psyche myself up, because it often feels like I've ruined every chance in life. I have to drown out one voice with another; I remind myself that I've come a long way, and have further still to go.

In Rosslare I cut Rob's hair. I was terrified; he had so much of it, grown out very long, into what I'll call the hair of a 19th century tubercular poet. I watched a few YouTube videos and went in with a kitchen scissors, snapping at the sides till it was only long on top. I tried to persuade him to keep it that way—David Lynch has this haircut, but Rob replied that he hated 'Twin Peaks: The Return'. Emil Cioran, then? He insisted I keep going. Nervously, tentatively, I trimmed till it was short all over.

MAY 11
It's probably laughable, but I almost cried when I got the call from my hairdresser, offering me a spot on their second day after re-opening. Today I went in and had it cut and coloured auburn, close to my original hair colour, which feels like a significant change after nine years as a blonde. This feels like the biggest step out of lockdown so far; like the end of one phase, and the start of another.

JUNE 12
Today Rob and I managed to get a table outside Er Buchetto in Ranelagh, and were sitting there with our drinks, enjoying the novelty of being allowed to sit outside cafes again, when a strange thing happened. First I saw a group of young men dressed in bright green rain jackets. They were absurdly clean-cut for people so young; I noticed their beaming smiles and sensible shoes. It took me a few seconds to realise that they were members of Fianna Fáil's youth wing, campaigning for Deirdre Conroy, a candidate in the by-election.

They moved towards us in a cloud of green, and I felt a strange sort of dread settle on me, realising, as they approached, that in their midst was Conroy herself and... yes, definitely, Micheál Martin. Both

were shaking hands at turbo speed, manoeuvring their army of wholesome young men through the narrow corridor between Er Buchetto's tables. They were closing in now. I gulped back my drink, and, as he passed us, the Taoiseach reached out and shook Rob's hand, looking him directly in the eye. Deirdre Conroy handed me a leaflet. Then they were gone.

After so many months of resenting Micheál Martin on the evening news, in person I found that I could not hold a grudge. I did, however, find it hard not to view him as a harbinger rather than an individual, an omen of some bizarre turn in our lives, an impenetrable lesson from the universe.

JULY 5
Plot twist: I have Covid. Or rather, Covid has me, after over a year spent evading its clammy grasp.

I'm currently eight days into quarantine—freedom is approaching—and the symptoms have been tolerable. That giant viral particle from the news, dull grey with red spikes, is inside me now, but its effects have been more psychological than physical. The worst parts, so far, have been waiting to learn if other people around me have it (they do), waiting to see if their symptoms are similar to mine (they're not), and worrying, chronically, about what might happen next.

Oh virus, you didn't need me as a host. You were well-known, wide-reaching, feared and written-about enough already. It's too late in the day to say anything profound about contracting Covid-19. What I will say, however, is that writing this diary has given meaning to what otherwise might have been lost; that it would be too easy—too sane, really—to scour away the memory of this year, a year in which we lived in the moment, not as some conscious effort but because we had no other choice. Writing offers us that chance to step outside time, to speak to ourselves and to each other. I consider it a privilege to speak to you, across the months, and experiences, and pages. ■





In 2010, **FINN RICHARDS** was commissioned to visit over a hundred Irish pubs to photograph their snugs. The **SNUG PROJECT** came into its own during lockdown. Twelve snugs were selected and made into prints and calendars in late 2020 which quickly sold out, raising almost €23,000 for ALONE. Here, alongside photographs from The Snug Project, selected artists from across forms have been asked to consider a little more deeply our relationship with pubs. Public house performance is examined by actor and theatre maker **GINA MOXLEY**. The Irish pub aesthetic is considered by visual artist **SALVATORE OF LUCAN**. The aural quality of the pub is evoked by sound artist and musician **NATALIA BEYLIS**.

We Are *Different* in Pubs

Dick Mack's, Dingle, Co. Kerry

FINN RICHARDS

FILMMAKER & PHOTOGRAPHER

WORKING ON THE ORIGINAL Snug Project I was sent an excel sheet with the names of more than a hundred pub owners. These all took the form of Forename + Surname. All but one, that is. The exception was listed simply as ‘Mrs. Coffey’. I was intrigued.

Mrs. Coffey opened the door, introduced herself as ‘Mrs. Coffey’ and hurried me into the closed-up bar as if she had left a pot on the boil. I was left standing on my own, and as my eyes adjusted to the darkened interior I started to notice things: the pink formica countertop; black leather bar stools complete with many coats of varnish; light pinky-beige room dividers; a handwritten “no ID, no cigarettes” sign; a three-foot cactus in the window. I unpacked my camera, found my shot, and started work.

Mrs. Coffey reappeared a little later and we chatted about her bar: how the pint glasses were all washed by hand rather than in a glasswasher; that she didn’t play music in her bar, but did allow sing-songs, sometimes. I got the sense that Mrs. Coffey had her bar exactly as she wanted it, and that incremental change was to be approached with caution, if at all.

J. Coffey’s of Borrisoleigh was a pretty small bar. It would feel full with twenty people. Its snug was at the front, and made private only by a wooden partition, painted in Coffey’s standard pinky gloss paint. But its well-worn formica counter testified to the range of life that it had seen: the big moments, the hilarity and lightness between friends. The quiet words. The freedom.

GINA MOXLEY

WRITER, PERFORMER, DIRECTOR

WAS BROUGHT UP—so to speak—in a country pub, eighth generation. We never said pub; pub implied upholstery, comfort. We called it ‘the bar’ which better described its utilitarian geometry. It was made entirely of wood; floor, counter, shelves, ceiling, furniture—the lot. A tinder box. It was, dare I say, authentic. Vernacular. Coated in nicotine accrued over countless decades. No singing, no dogs, no



Coffey’s, Borrisoleigh, Co. Tipperary

children after seven o’clock. In retrospect, it seems like an anti-bar, though the singing rule was arbitrarily relaxed around Christmas when the place turned into a messy, maudlin Feis, only for the edict to be doubly enforced in the new year. It’s odd now to think how certain behaviour was tolerated while other carry-on was frowned upon. Public displays of affection weren’t acceptable in the mid-seventies. Though we sold tongue sandwiches, kissing was a barrable offence. Rules concerning women didn’t even need to be articulated. These were the days before wine: women drank G&T’s, sherry, whackers of brandy, and bottled beer. They were rarely loud or visibly drunk though we’d often find empty naggins in the cistern of the ladies loo. Their enjoyment was covert.

McDaid’s, Dublin City





Top Nolan's, Kildare Town, Co. Kildare

For the most part the customers were men—many living alone, or with Mammy, oxidizing on stools at our counter. The poster boys of far too many plays in the Irish canon. Our job was to serve them, listen, appear non-judgemental—which made them spill the beans. A secular confessional.

It's a gruelling business running a public house, being in front of people, 363 days a year. My grandmother ran it when I was a kid, then my mother took over, and I worked there for all of my teens. Ever alert to changes in customer behaviour, I learnt how to read a room. A bullshit antenna was a family trait—a necessity really. There was no real separation between the public and private space—a doorbell rang in the living room when help was needed or trouble was brewing in the bar. Our kitchen was commandeered for card playing once a week. A drunk, who did handstands to prove he was sober, would be put to sleep in one of our beds. On Sundays we'd escape for lunch to a nearby hotel—not for the treat of it, simply because there wasn't time to cook in the break between shifts. We'd return to a full car park with a massive crowd ready to come in. When I'm sitting in the dressing room backstage before a performance and I hear the audience enter, over the tannoy, I feel an echo: that collective anticipation, while you gird yourself, focus on the performance ahead. Preparing to be in charge, to be looked at. To be on stage and corralling an audience is something I was training for unwittingly. The steeliness and gameyness needed behind a counter prepared me.

It's claimed that the audience's heartbeats synchronise in the theatre and in certain bars it feels like something similar happens. Those are the special nights to remember and what we've longed for during this interminable stretch when both have been closed, endangered.

The bar went on fire once while we were all in bed asleep. It should've gone up in flames in jig time but nicotine saved us. Huge, surreal, tarry, viscous bubbles protected the wood from the flames for long enough for the fire brigade to arrive. And the place rose from the ashes even more popular than it had been before. We live in hope.



The Dew Drop, Galway City, Co. Galway

SALVATORE OF LUCAN

VISUAL ARTIST

IT'S HARD TO WRITE ABOUT the aesthetics of pubs. I reckon this is because I think of 'aesthetics' as something very deliberate, rather than natural. In this sense, I believe good pubs have a charming anti-aesthetic attitude. Certain settled objects inside the pub will never be moved or reconsidered because of their spiritual importance, rather than any aesthetic quality. If it was just about the aesthetic qualities then maybe the new pubs who buy vintage

and antique pieces in an attempt to recreate the feel of an old pub might actually work. But really a vintage cornflakes box and a few tins of beans in the corner is just shabby chic. In a way it kinda reminds me of the canned crowd noises in televised football matches in Covid times. Awfully fake and unnecessary.

When I was small and my family were going to the pub, I'd love if there was a football game on. I didn't have Sky Sports at home so I rarely got to watch club football live. So I think a TV in a pub is nice. But a pub without one is fantastic also, especially if there's a rugby match on. In general TVs are placed



Páidí Ó Sé's, Ventry, Co. Kerry

The Oyster Tavern, Tralee, Co. Kerry





Paul's Bar, Dingle, Co. Kerry

at the fulcrum of a room which often makes it feel like the room revolves around them. Like in a living room. In well-lived pubs and living rooms I find a few similarities. A good carpet: they're sort of like dream catchers holding the spirits in. Embossed wallpaper which has been painted is similarly magical for me, particularly in gloss paint. Looking at an old pub wall, the idea of the layers of paint and different colours and wallpaper underneath is exciting. In observing this, I can fantasise the role of an archaeologist, peeling and peeling away. It feels secretive, or sacred maybe. Layers of paint having a weight of age, infused with decades of smoke, and damp, and dust. Like how faded seat upholstery holds the presence of those before.

As well as the good old pubs that feel like a living room, there are also the posher kinda ones. As well as the ones in the middle. In all you'll find a lot of dark wood, mahogany, soft furnishings and fireplaces—and maybe in the posher ones you'll find more brass and copper or mosaics. There's a cultural past witnessed when you look around a good pub. In this way, that feeling is almost spiritual or at least it contains the ghosts of some emotion. Where one can be watered and fed and left in peace and even perhaps near some stained glass. After I was asked to write this, I texted my mate Tapo to see what he thought and he described a story he'd heard of a pub where they had a TV designated solely to horse racing, and because it was only ever on one channel the logo of the racing channel had burnt itself onto the screen



O'Flaherty's, Dingle, Co. Kerry

permanently. And in that single indelible visual mark you could find the culture of the pub.

Katherine Lamb's window in Grogan's is an interior scene of the pub and it is on show inside the pub. In a *meta* way it addresses the 'aesthetic' of the pub as well as recording some of the real people who have been part of the place. I like the idea that a good pub must have its aesthetics set in stone, be archaic or irreproducible. Lamb's window immortalises the pub's interior in stained glass, allowing the pub to doubly cement its identity within its keystone image, reinforcing their aesthetic with their own aesthetic—very cool.

NATALIA BEYLIS

MUSICIAN & SOUND ARTIST

USED TO LIVE IN THE CITY, but since moving to Leitrim over a decade ago, an aimless adventure in Dublin has become a mythical and rare occasion.

Nowadays if I'm in a city at dusk, it's always for work: rushing past cozy pubs while running late for soundchecks, staring at tipsy merrymakers while stuck in traffic on the quays, tuning in to conversations spilling from doorways as I schlep gear to a venue. Tonight, however, I carry neither objects nor obligations.

There are four of us. We've decided on Grogan's, a classic, which we foolishly think will be the first of many. While the others chat along the way, I get lost in the individual rhythms of our footsteps as they reverberate against the red brick paving of Castle Market, once the core of the city's Rag Trade, and join a mechanical ghost symphony of sewing machines and typewriters which emanates from these buildings—I have a tendency to get consumed by the sounds around me. In 2013 I did a year long audio project in 365 parts called *The Sunken Hum Sound Diary*. Every day, I recorded and uploaded a two-minute field recording of my daily life. The sounds ranged from the backdrop



O'Neill's, Dublin City

Tigh Neachtain's, Galway City, Co. Galway



phrase with a circular clattering of change onto the tabletop. The prelude is over and we're in a free-form flow of the dingy register, the high hiss of liquid from the taps, an unexpected friend chiming bright from across tables 'oh hello!' The waitress returns regularly, and always with perfect timing it seems. A new pair, dolled up in a style of a budding romance, nestles into a nearby corner. They're tuned only to each other, into elements of communication that go beyond what is spoken. My ears strain to pick up the crux of the melody but they remain tucked within their private sphere. I crinkle the crisp packet into a ball and stretch with a satisfied sigh.

'Sorry. Sorry. Oh excuse me. Oh sorry there,' I sing-song and sidestep through a crowd towards the toilets.

A bassy banter breaks the confines of the 'Gents'. In contrast, the 'Ladies' is hushed. Close your eyes, listen as the water drips soothingly from an unclosed tap, and mixes with a deep hum coming from inside the wall behind the cistern. The tones meld and echo off the tiles and porcelain like a composition crafted for respite.

Back at base, the rising pitch of the crowd is compelling but my full attention gets absorbed by the familiar cinematic stained-glass window, a scene of reds and blues, dulcet daytime Grogans, the near opposite to this pulsating Saturday throb. The familiarity of a warm mischievous giggle beside me brings a fermata to my thoughts. It is one of the best skills that the pub possesses: the ability to momentarily loosen you from the confines of your inner self. Our friend Karen arrives. We four, having resided in this spot for long enough to feel duties of hospitality, harmonise like an out of time choir, 'what are you drinking?'

It seems only a moment later that a sudden lone sound rises above the cacophony: 'Last orders!' ■

drones of domestic life, to criss-crossing conversations from my local pub in Drumsna morphing into vocal cut-ups, to snapshots of foreign lands recast as sonic postcards. Since then, I have become attuned to the musicality of seemingly mundane noises, so tonight I indulge in a sonic survey. Behind us a frenzy of seagull squawks pan the sky. Ahead is the soothing purr of the early evening pub.

Willie utters that warm word: 'Pints?' Katherine pauses to greet Tommy behind the bar. I waltz towards an empty table and Aonghus gathers seats with a well rehearsed refrain: 'Are you using this?' We shift our vocal textures to match the tonality of the situation. The levels are set to 'post-work/post-shopping/pre-dinner meet-up'. Two friends greet each other with an impatient hiss of a jacket zipper and muah of lips. The waitress settles four pints down with a thump thump thump thump and concludes the

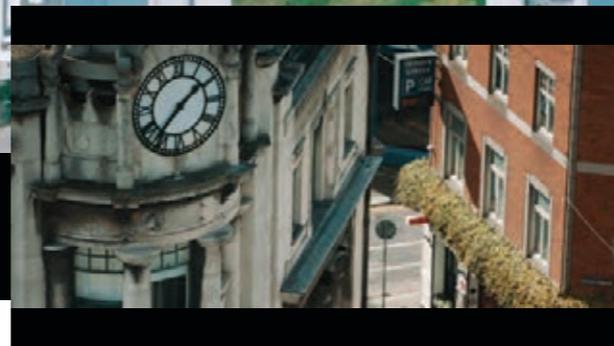
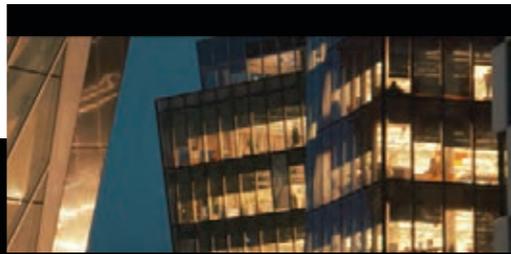


Credits for The Snug Project

Photographer: Finn Richards
 Project Creative Director: Ciana March
 Designer: Paul Guinan
 PR: Fiona Donnelan, Sustainable PR
 Social Media Manager: Sally McCarthy
 Motion Designer: Ryan Kavanagh
 Printers (Calendars): Plus Print
 Printers (Limited Edition Prints): Hen's Teeth

The Irish Architecture Foundation commissioned Dyehouse Films to produce 10 short documentaries that celebrate a number of architectural success stories throughout Dublin. However, Dyehouse also created an 11th film, *Recovering Space*, that responded to the city under lockdown, with a range of leading Irish architects contributing their thoughts on the future of the city. See holyshow.ie/extras to watch the short film.

Holy Show in turn commissioned three artists to give a creative response to the themes and ideas expressed in *Recovering Space*. **Kerry Guinan** is a visual artist with an interest in intervening in capitalism; **Emmett Scanlon** is an architect focused on the social purpose of architecture, and **Sean O'Reilly** is a writer who has recently swapped his long-time home in Dublin for Inis Mór.



RECOVERING SPACE

Where did nature go?

KERRY GUINAN

MY MOST PROFOUND EXPERIENCE of nature in Dublin City during the pandemic was on a warm May day, standing in the middle of Talbot Street as I became conscious of menstrual blood streaming down my shorts along an exposed thigh. At a loss for a public toilet, I threw my head to the glaring sky and thought, ‘what would you have me do now, Council?’ A similarly desperate incident recently led me into a multi-story urban carpark, squatting and surveying my environment as I pulsed piss onto the smooth cement floor. Its surface felt improperly interior, and I worried that I was in fact relieving myself indoors, until it dawned on me that it didn’t matter anymore. I had become, or always was, animal.

Recovering Space commissioned by the Irish Architecture Foundation contemplates the future of the city after the COVID-19 pandemic. It rightly identifies a heightened awareness of local facilities (or lack thereof), a collective yearning for the

natural environment, and a silence forged by the defection of office workers and tourists from the city. The contributors reflect that the pandemic has taught us that ‘we are creatures of nature,’ ‘human animals’ with ‘essential’ biological needs such as light, space, and, presumably, excretion, which must be catered for through architecture.

I would like to contribute an embodied perspective on these matters as a young person and human animal, currently roving this evolved urban environment. My experience of Dublin City during the pandemic has been that of a budding wildness, spreading among those who have not flocked on to greener pastures. Residents of the city—especially the young, the gardenless, and the underclass—wear a hardiness shaped from prolonged exposure to the elements and a newly confident attitude to public territory. Those essential activities that previously occupied the private realm—food, play, art, sex, defecation—are now, by necessity, taking place in the exposed outdoors. The response from the city is analogous with animal control. Hoses



Shelley McNamara

ARCHITECT

“This pandemic heightens the basic needs of human beings. Which has always been at the basis of architecture—that’s not new. Alberti in the 15th century, the great humanist, talked about exactly the same things... You could say it’s a time to highlight essential qualities of architecture.”

flood pavements to prevent people from sitting, riot police herd socialising youths back to their cramped homes, and businesses campaign against the nascent presence of human excrement on their doorsteps. The return to nature is in full swing, but not all of us are smelling roses.

In ‘City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City,’ Maria Kaika describes a ‘schizophrenic attitude’ to nature in the city. On the one hand nature stands for ‘the “uncivilized”, the dark and untamed wilderness that requires control.’ As Níall McLaughlin alludes to in this film, the COVID-19 pandemic is nature of this sort, and cities such as London and Paris have historically been planned to push such nature out—covering and building over rivers that were carriers of epidemics. On the other hand, nature is also perceived as ‘inherently “good”, as the embodiment of some innate superior moral code’ that has been

‘perverted through urbanisation.’ Part of the problem is that nature is a ‘notoriously slippery term,’ prone to disintegration in any test of logic that seeks to differentiate it from human activity. Nature and the city are entangled in relations that do not always meet the environmentalist vision of a green, livable city. As much as the city tries to contain nature, to tame it and convert it into an idyllic aesthetic, there will always be leakages which, Kaika suggests, can provoke a moment of insight, revealing ‘the presence of the excluded “outside” as a constitutive part of the “inside.”’

Back on Talbot Street as my blood trickled past my knee, I thought about what it means to be a citizen, to be designated a subject of civilized society. There is a certain liberation in falling outside of this category, in your city treating you as the human animal you are—a wild force to be reckoned with.

Quotations taken from pgs 14, 57, 57, Kaika, Maria, *City of Flows: Modernity, Nature, and the City*, 2005, Routledge Press; and pg 14, Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, 2007, Harvard College.

City Limits

EMMETT SCANLON

Date: 8th July 2021

Time: 17.45

Location: Phibsborough

Weather: Dry, warm. Not sun or shadow.

*too small and too limited
if you have enough space
to re-evaluate the basic values
the city's empty now
anything like enough people living
doubly, trebly, quadruply important
empty ourselves out into the countryside
it somehow heightens
material contact to touch
the job of architects*

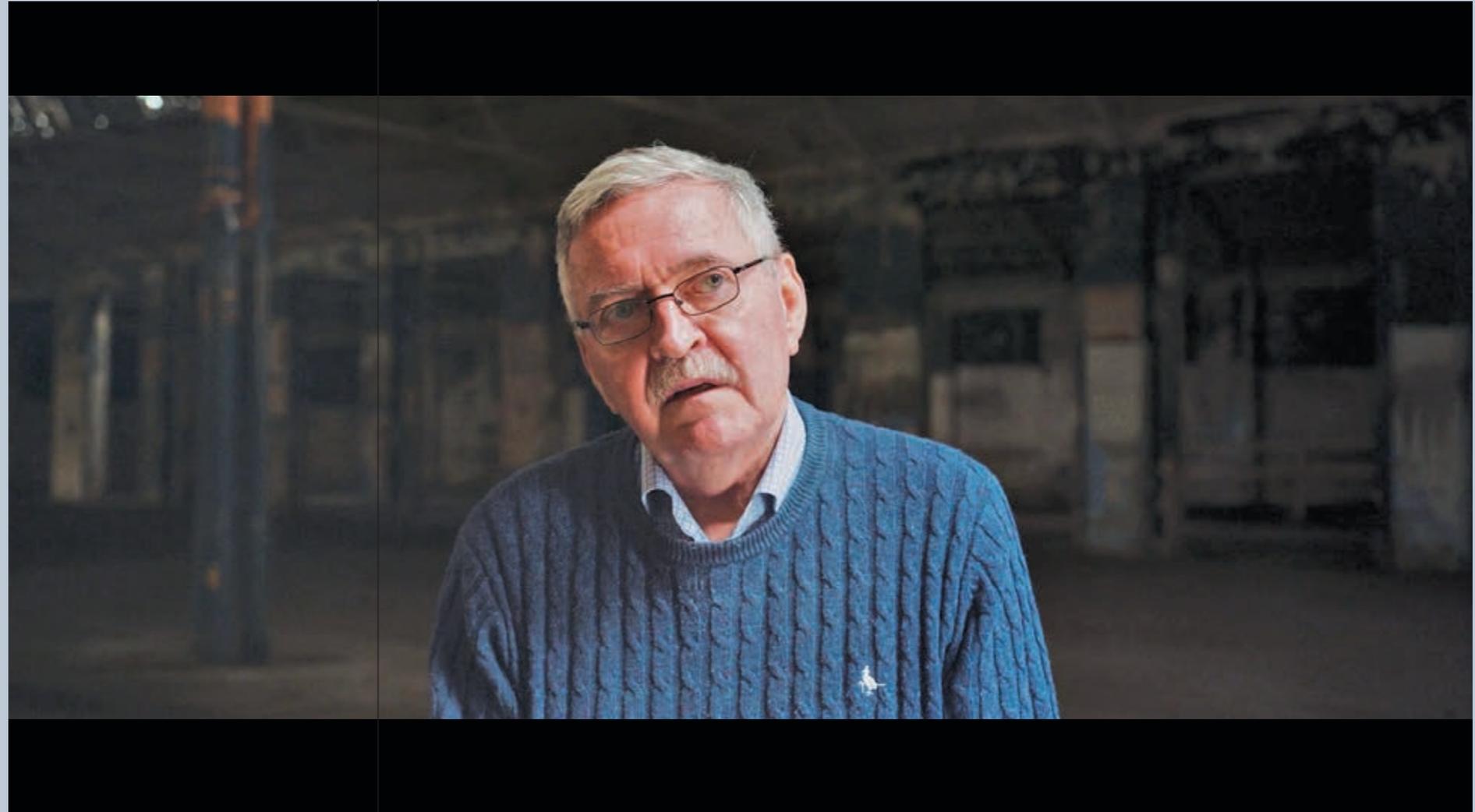
These words, taken from the film *Recovering Space*, are among the last I hear before I put blue earphones on my head, lock the door and leave. I have watched the film eleven times today. It is, it seems to me, a film in which many of the speakers meditate on measurement. The size of rooms; the capacity of a city to feel full or empty; the reach of values. I set out toward an exhibition opening in Dublin centre with measurement on my mind. I like to walk both with and against a city. As I do, Dublin invites me to resist my architect's desire to set limits and be certain. I choose to be lost on streets with songs.

*Somewhere in the middle of the never-ending noise / there
is a constant steady rhythm of a heart that beats / And a
million voices blend into a single voice / And you can hear
it in the glamour of the crowded streets.*

'I AM THE CITY', ABBA

18.00

In *My Fair Lady*, it took just two hundred and ten seconds for Freddy Eynsford-Hill to declare his love for Eliza on the street where she lived. Architects love streets. *Streets in the sky. Streets in the air. The future of main street.* In my horizon appear four hundred and nine rough-cast concrete panels of a shopping centre soon to be home to two hundred and ninety-seven units of living. No streets in the air, not there. Freddy



Frank McDonald

JOURNALIST

“The primary lesson from the Covid pandemic is that there aren't anywhere near enough people living in the centre of Dublin to sustain the local businesses... it was so quiet—my God it was so quiet!”

owned the street. Eliza fought to escape it. I do not yet know how to measure the distance between them.

What makes me think about you? Claude Parent. Mies van Der Rohe. Pierre Koenig. Le Corbusier. John Lautner. Richard Neutra. Melnikov. That makes me think about you.

'WHAT MAKES ME THINK ABOUT YOU', NICHOLAS GODIN

18.20

Follow the curb on O'Connell Street as the cars go by / Do you ever feel that you're caught between the Spike and the wheel? / This is not Sex and the City / It's just loneliness in high heels.

'SPIKE AND THE WHEEL', THE TYCHO BRAHE

O'Connell Street is five hundred meters long. I step under a canopy of trees and slalom through seven skinny trunks at one-hundred-and-thirty-one beats per minute. A summer night, the street seems not-empty. I do not wish to solve the mystery of origin of others. I enjoy that I do not know these twenty, thirty, fifty strangers. A scarlet carton tumbles across a stone path. A cyan mask is caught in a corduroy-barked branch that was spared the city's saw. Behind my own mask, I smile.

It's elusive, call it glitter / Somehow something turns me on / Some folks only see the litter / We don't miss them when they're gone.

'SUMMER NIGHT CITY', ABBA

18.30

Irish cities are often compared to other cities—'just why can't we have tree lined boulevards like Paris?' I often feel these grand comparisons are a way to avoid doing what could actually be done: Dublin will never measure up, so don't even try. 'Dublin's main street proudly enjoys a diversity of fenestration comparable to any European capital. It even rivals Copenhagen'—I imagine this is how an ad campaign might go. I try, but I cannot count the windows on O'Connell Street. A shirtless man is looking down with an iPhone to his left ear, yawning, his breath hotly kissing a hotel window. Of which Dublin will he dream?

Follow the curb on O'Connell Street as the cars go by... I have no home in the city. But the city lives in my dreams.

'SPIKE AND THE WHEEL', TYCHO BRAHE



Ali Grehan

DUBLIN CITY ARCHITECT

“The pressure we're finding ourselves under with Covid, and with what seems to be a retreat from the city, it's doubly important that we proclaim our own belief in the credibility of the city, and the necessity for the city to thrive.”

19.04

I am inside, upstairs in a room overlooking the Liffey. There are fifty-two precise plan drawings of tiny city rooms with rising rents, pinned to a frame, leaning on a party wall. The plans are drawn from the digital domestic digest, Daft.ie. A full-scale room is rebuilt within the actual room. It is made entirely of white. There is labour here, and intense control of many details of domestic life, stitched and rolled and folded in stiff paper. A drawing come to life. An exquisite exhibition of measurement.

In his colour memoir, *Chroma*, Derek Jarman was suspicious of white. 'It takes hard work whitewashing. What are we shutting out?' he asks. White is the interior camouflage of real estate. It is a colour of neutrality, used to eradicate personal identity so potential buyers are not offended. Baudrillard, too, wrote that the 'world of colour is opposed to the world of value'. He meant economic value; white is simply worth more. For almost a century, the use of white has stripped walls of their material value. They become gaunt, pulled taut across every available surface to suffocate all thoughts and all traces of dirt and desire. Visitors are required to wear royal blue shoe-slippers over their dusty-city soles, to keep the white, white.

Put it on / I can feel so much / Put it on / I don't need to touch.
'BLUE DRESS', DEPECHE MODE

19.34

I withdraw. I step-down, step after step after step. I count and I count. *The job of an architect*. One, two. Turn. Landing. Seven, eight, nine, ten thousand nine hundred and fifty days of architecture later, I note a growing acceptance that my architecture-counting is now reserved for words; instead of finite bricks and mortar, I am drawn to the sonorous, immeasurable potential of the white page. Compelled to flood that page with the colour drained from rooms, I teeter on the edge of this city's grey granite steps, my eyes dancing on the laps of the infinite green river, heart giddy with the golden and the garrulous. Fall, cry the gulls. Fly. I extend my arms and step, finally weightless into the opening night.



Niall McLoughlin

ARCHITECT

“Cities have developed through a time when there has been the presence of infectious disease all the time. And many cities have bound around their form and their development issues which relate to that. People tended to leave the city when there was contagion. But one thing for sure is they always came back afterwards.”

Blue Flag

SEAN O'REILLY

HERE MUST BE A WORD FOR IT, not wanting to leave an island. For staying put better, wider. For not budging a cubic inch perch knot. Twice a day the ferry twists the harbour's arm, twice a day the tide slides down the beach without me. O captain in your leather coat and sandals, gaze serene from your briary beard, there must be a word for hoping you don't come back.

Only meanness keeps this sea and land apart. Rusty *fáinne* on the triple breasted waves. Cliffs of silk, dented enamelled fields. Shrines coarse and enigmatic far out on the crag. Orchid, seal, donkey with a mouth like a burned-out tree house. O busy forklift. O tower of pallets on a floodlit dock before dawn—let me stay.

They used to make eternity here. Like there was no tomorrow, the thin-bellied saints waded out of the surf, hunting ecstasy. Souls for weapons, they scrubbed away the grass with their knees. Syllabic glee in hives aimed east. Divine, the robin at your door in the morning, the garlic and violet meadow, the island's only ambulance heading for *Gort na gCapall* in freak snow. Did they have a noun for a cemetery of altars, for the tinfoil gleam of rock after a downpour, the adverb for the way the jarvey sponges the young horse who will never accept the harness, something lives behind the recycling bins they did not dare baptise.

Renounce the city. Prolong the fast. Abstain from corners and soft corridors. Swap the dome for precipice, pillar for mast, heels for flats. The glass colleges for the five wee windows of sense. That feeling of having bet the terraced house car sex-life on a *pinse* of once Iberian seabed, a November sun up your sleeve. The high blue glue turn mauve. Peach to crustacean *oráiste*. Mint into browns of gloating stinginess. No one is going anywhere today. The shop

will shut at two. The bars sink on the modem. Bring in the pews from the car park, the barrow, the new spade. To the hi vis men in a low pressure maritime landscape only aquamarine nylon rope endures. Eldritch, the kayak under the bed, the soft toy stuffed with hair, the slack in a room where you're not allowed to change a word.

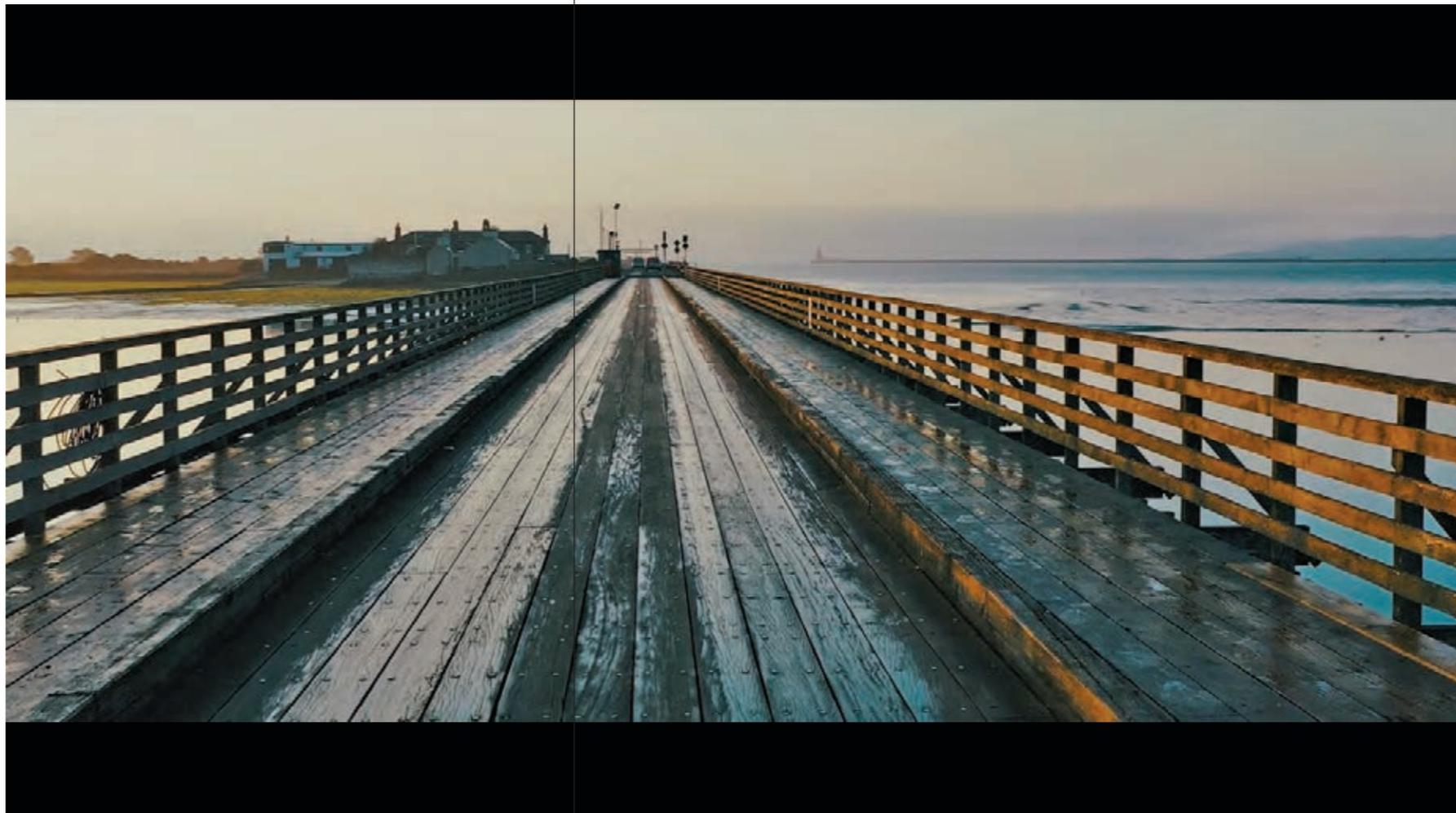
Maybe there's one *as Gaeilge* for it—the saturation of every street by the uncanny, the familiarity of the emptiness. The accelerating invisibility. How the holes in our pockets become phones in our fists, for Calypso keeping her man. Will we make a mess of nature like we did with God? Will you spill your blood

for the sea, the honeybee, the trees? A demon said to me from the door of a shed, measure me, calculate me too for I am poisoned and imperilled and my children grieve like lobsterpots in the sun.

O demon beast monster ghost, what will we find under the ice? The skull of the original scapegoat? An ██████? A robot foot? Who among you has even a riddle to offer? Should we have stormed the stage, scattered the chorus? The moment before the applause, that abyss, the gulp, the fetch of open fear, that was how we knew you. Now the lovers sit on their hands. The 68a, seats taped over, roars past like a mobile *láthair choir*. There are words for things that don't exist like desire justice home and prenominal streets pierce the clouds. Now *an Saorstát* commands you gently to resume. The mask has slipped. Curtains of plastic. Every room a ward. Surplus dead burned by

the river side. A cancelled wedding. Silence that will outlive us. Surveillance that will outlive us. The touch of the half empty shelf. Unaccompanied children picked out of the sea, all eyes. Horror is a TG 27 type marine searchlight. The silver blanket.

O child born into a sci-fi horror subgenre for beginners, forgive me already. I am man with pram on beach in rain. I am state funded self-employed tax haven globalised innovation zone. I am maladaptively stored, incompletely redacted. I am castaway rewilded artless. Your nappy weighs more than my kinda post-colonial concrete past. May you never hear the word for it, this wind-burned dread of the gap under the door of the cut-glass Atlantic sky. Pressure 1015hPa. Humidity 87%. Wind NW 34km/hr. Visibility 16.1km. Feels like 7°. May you never forget the word for *amach*. ■



Niall McCullough

ARCHITECT

"If you have a sense of history, I think you see Covid in the context of human evolution... you have to get your psyche around it... and it's causing a huge amount of claustrophobia. I think architects should be ready and available to answer people's questions when they come out of it. People will be really focused on the difficulty of where they live, and it's lack of facilities, in a way they never have been before."