



“Home Waters”

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1

December 2015, three days before Christmas. A woman walking along a strand on the southwest coast of Ireland finds a loggerhead sea turtle washed up on the pebbly sand. Wasted and exhausted, cold and confused, but still alive.

An adult loggerhead can outweigh an alligator and outlive a donkey. They have snub noses, sleepy eyes, and perpetually displeased expressions. The upper shell is ginger, amber, apricot. The underside is creamy yellow. The head is leopard print. The front flippers are long and wide and winglike; there is no creature more perfectly poised between dinosaur and angel than a loggerhead turtle. They swim in parts of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and the Mediterranean Sea, waters that are warm and calm. They have no business here in Ireland, where it is primarily wild and chilly. The displeased expression of a loggerhead sea turtle beached in the shallows of an Irish shore at Christmastime is entirely justified.

What a frightening derangement of nature, I think, when I hear the story. And a dreadful picture rises like bile in my head: a different strand, a different season. Under an ashen sky in autumn, on the brown shale of a Turkish beach, in blue shorts and a red T-shirt, lies the tiny, bedraggled body of a drowned boy. This is the photograph that made global headlines in the early days of September 2015. The boy is a three-year-old Syrian called Aylan Kurdi who perished at the mercy of an unseaworthy vessel in his family’s attempt to cross the Mediterranean and reach the Greek island of Kos. It rises into my head – rises irresistibly, unsummoned – rises in spite of how reluctant I am to draw comparison between a turtle and a boy.

2

Winter 2011. A dark-sky morning, rain battering against our rented roof. The sound of clinking – softly, softly – like the rigging of a sailing ship, a wind chime caught in a draught. It clinks through my sleep; my dream-riddled mind registers it as unfamiliar – not the usual birdsong or barking or my boyfriend’s breathing – its unfamiliarity rouses me. Cautiously, I descend the stairs to find our ground floor flooded. Soupy water shin deep, surface bog brown and rippled. But the water itself is deathly silent. It’s the empty glass bottles usually placed in a cluster around the base of the rubbish bin that make the sound. They are flouting about, colliding gently with one another. The table and chairs stand helpless in the flood. The dog’s water dish has sunk beneath the weight of its load. My left Wellington boot has filled up and capsized. Its novelty polka dots seem suddenly, unbearably, ridiculous. I

I was born with salted blood, When I was a child, I wanted –desperately, desperately – to be, when I grew up, and artist who lived by the sea. All of my brightest memories are backdropped by crashing waves and unclouded sky: I am bouncing in marram grass on a cliff



edge; I am doggy-paddling against the current. In April 2011, I moved with my boyfriend from Dublin city to a shorefront village called Whitegate on the edge of Cork harbor. TO a tiny, tumbledown house in a terrace with an oil refinery at one end and an electricity power station at the other. Admittedly, a somewhat compromised version of the childhood dream. Trucks trundle though day and night, coating the parked cars and window boxes with dust. The water across the road is certified unsafe for swimming. The sea view out our front windows is obstructed by oils storage tanks. After our first flood, the locals tell us it was the worst for twenty years.

We've lived here for five years, and it floods every winter, and sometimes again in spring, and once even in the middle of July. Storms can occur in any season; in this harbor, when they concur with high tides, it creates a flood. The water never comes over the wall and spills across the road; instead it arrives by way of the drains in the backyard, trickling under the skirting boards and up from the cracks between floor tiles. Every time it happens we camp upstairs and hope the flood doesn't creep high enough to infiltrate the lowest socket and shut the electricity off.

We develop new habits. Bringing the glass to the bottle bank before it accumulates, accumulating ragged old cloths and towels instead – donated by family member – for the soaking-up of flood water, and after every flood, we wring out and rinse, dry out and fold, place them aside in wait for the next time. We pay particular attention to the elements. A booklet of tide tables lies over open on the kitchen worktop. The weather forecast play out over the radio once every hour. Sandbags are banked up at both doors – in half a decade we never feel safe enough to remove them. Instead we duck down and hop over, duck down and hop over, duck down and hop over duck, duck down and hop over. We adapt to the small threat that looms at the edge of out days, as our small house looms at the edge of the temperamental harbor. But with adaptation comes complacency. One evening I stand stubbornly over the electric cooker as the floodwater puddles beneath, bored of caution. Willing my potatoes to be roasted before I am electrocuted.

3

A memory from childhood that does not include any sea: I am gazing out the playroom window through a kaleidoscope of whirling droplets; I am chanting a rhyming couplet: rain, rain, go away . . . come again another day . . .

When I am home, it doesn't seem to me as if I talk about the rain all that much. It's only when I am away – elsewhere, overseas – that my susceptibility to the elements singles me out from those around me. I automatically quiz strangers about the precipitation in the place where they're from. Its frequency and strength, the shapes it takes and the shapes it leaves behind on the landscape. And then I compare and contrast their replies to the temper and nature of my home-rain. It's only when I am away and carrying out these tedious little exercises in rain study that I understand how much of a natural preoccupation – a national preoccupation – it is in Ireland. And I understand again as I return, as the airplane begins its descent. Dropping below the level of the ubiquitous clouds, my home island looms into view, and I see afresh, and freshly appreciate, its unequivocal, influential greenness.



In Ireland, we have numerous ways to recognize the coming of the rain: red sky in the morning, seated cows, horses stamping. When a cat settles down to wash behind his ears, there must be a shower approaching. Or when a dog eats grass, or soot falls down a chimney, or a yellow ring appears around the moon, And when the rain inevitably arrives, we have even more ways of describing it: as spitting, lashing, drizzling, driving, bucketing, Soft, fierce, showery, slanted. Localized, hovering, torrential.

There is an expression I tend to use nowadays: I feel it in my waters. As if there is a small sea enclosed inside me that I entrust all my decisions to.

4

Summer 2015. At night, on our television screen, between national weather forecasts, we watch scenes from a different sea, one we can rest assured will never infiltrate our sockets. A distant body of water that I have always imagined to be calmer, warmer, bluer: the Mediterranean. But these nights on our TV screen, in defiance of my imagination, these waters are persistently disturbed. By naval vessels and low-flying helicopters. By smuggling boats, sometimes floating, but more often capsized. Mostly timber, but sometimes only rubber – precarious as a polka-dot Wellington boot on a flooded kitchen floor. And the smuggled cargo of the unbearably ridiculous vessels: Syrians, Afghans, Eritreans. Men, women, and children, their first salted memories being formed as I watch. They are embarking upon a sea that represents a passage into safety. Behind them, the tumult of Africa and the Middle East. Before them: the sanctuary of Europe. And the only separation: a body of water not quite as calm, warm, and blue as imagined.

In May, the first Irish naval vessel is deployed to the Mediterranean to assist Italian authorities. It is called the LÉ Eithne, the LÉ standing for Long Éireannach, or Irish Ship. It is followed in the months to come by the LÉ Niamh and LÉ Róisín. Our ships generally seem to bear the names of girls with whom I shared a class in high school; all except for the LÉ Samuel Beckett and LÉ James Joyce – names chosen, inadvertently, in tactless recognition of the experimental poetry of their missions.

The base of the Irish Naval Service is Haulbowline Island, situated in the middle of Cork harbor. Though the island is hidden from our front-facing windows by the oil refinery's storage tanks, still we often sight its ships channeling through our obstructed view. They are squat to the water, missile shaped, painted bluish gray: a shade of the Celtic Sea in winter. Gradually it dawns on me that these are the same vessels I watch on the news at night, the ones that set forth to valiantly disturb the Mediterranean. On the TV screen, we are permitted to see them up close. Decks and rails and flapping tricolor. Life belts and life dinghies, the intense orange of life jackets. And outstretched arms lifting dripping infants, regulation blankets wrapped around shaking shoulders. The migrant crisis is reported in the Irish media from a peculiarly personal angle. Now we are taking some responsibility; it is our catastrophe too. Between May and November, Irish ships rescued 8,592 people from the Mediterranean Sea. And yet the ones I spot returning to the harbor hold only crew; the rescued civilians swallowed somewhere along the way by European bureaucracy.

5



Winter 2015, the last one we spend in Whitegate. It rains and rains. Every morning I wake to listen to the prophetic pitter-patter, the tell-tale clinking of shipwrecked objects: our own personal flood-warning. The longest, largest Irish river – the Shannon – swells and swells, and bursts. Houses far from any seafront, unanswerable to any tide, flood too. The traces the weather leaves on the landscape aren't so much shapes as ravages. Fields become lakes; roads become rivers. Animals are drowned, displaced, disconcerted. "The cattle inside in the trailers are getting dizzy from going side to side over the potholes," a farmer in County Kerry tells a newspaper reporter. The blood banks appeal for emergency supplies.

The sandbags are still there on the day we finally leave. They are squashed down and split and leaking. There are watermarks on the rusted chair and table legs. The low-down wall paint is warped and peeling.

We move –finally, finally – away from the harbor and to the west coast, the side of Ireland that faces the North Atlantic and is most vulnerable to roguish weather. We still have a sea view, but it is significantly farther away now, and much of the time obscured by rainclouds. When it does appear, it is always surprising, always tremendous. The house is on a hill; the rain runs down and away from us. Several of the properties in the surrounding countryside have a nameplate bolted into their front walls: Radharc na Mara, view of the sea – even though their views are just as far flung and unpredictable as ours. But people like to make this claim, whilst simultaneously maintaining immunity from the sea's force.

And yet if I walk down our hill and away for a distance, and up an opposite hill, and then turn around and look back, it appears every bit as if the ocean behind the house rises above it – the level of the sea towering over the level of the land – as though at any minute, it will drop down and deluge, not just our house, but everything, my whole small island. Despite the salted blood and sea home, I swim only on the stillest days. My boyfriend angles from the rocks and I walk the cliff trails, but always, we are conscious, cautious. Love and trust are often different states, respect and fear often the same. We know we are safer onshore than off, that everybody knows this, in their water; we appreciate that people don't choose sea over land unless they are already drowning.

6

May 5, 2016. The LÉ Róisín releases the loggerhead turtle beached in West Cork three days before Christmas 2015 into the Mediterranean. Since being rescued, she has been cared for in a turtle sanctuary in Dingle, County Kerry. On arrival, she had sores on the soft parts of her body and weighed only fifteen kilograms – far less than a healthy loggerhead should. She was put on a saline drip, her sores dressed. She was named Una, after the woman who found her. With the improving weather, a fresh gush of refugees are risking the crossing to Europe, and so it is necessary for the Irish navy so send ships again. Once the sanctuary staff have fed Una back up to weight of twenty-three kilograms, to strength and health, they contact the Irish Naval Service and inquire as to whether it might be possible for one of the ships deploying to the Mediterranean for humanitarian duties to deliver the stranded, mended loggerhead turtle back to a suitable environment. Also onboard the LÉ Róisín in May is a consignment of two hundred



woolen teddy bears knitted by members and friends of the Church of Ireland Mothers' Union. They are to be gifted to rescued children.

Una is lifted from a timber box on a rubber dinghy. Just for a second, she is held aloft at the edge of the rubber boat, as if in explanation of the situation, as if to ensure she appreciates the long way she has come and all she has suffered, and that what this represents is a passage into safety.

Splash, slap, slap, slap, sink; an angelic dinosaur is returned to her home waters.