

"You are neither here nor there,

A hurry through which known and strange things pass

As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways

And catch the heart off guard and blow it open."

- Séamus Heaney, Postscript

This is a collection of snapshots of contemporary Ireland. It is not a representative account. There is no consistent way that people live or have lived on this island. It is a nation in flux by necessity. We are like sparks of flint flying without direction in the night. We are like running water, whole only by changing.

January, Limerick

The rain drizzled lightly around Henry Street, spitting lightly on my face as I walked home. I had wrapped my scarf around my head to keep it dry. It had gone two in the morning but there were still people on the streets. They were all young and moving in small groups, looking forward, talking quietly. No one was wearing a coat. The men uniformly held their hands flat in the front pockets of their jeans with white arms posed stiffly downwards. I could almost see legions of fair hairs standing perpendicular to their arms in the cold.

At the corner by Shannon Street, a girl with bright blonde hair was jumping up and down in a puddle beside the footpath. She looked like the cup of a pale daffodil, her dress tight and ending in frills just below her arse. Her shoes were in her right hand, her left

pumping in a jerky dance. Dark streaks ran down her face, and there were splatterings of mud on her bare legs.

She turned around to see if her friends were watching.

“SOOOOPHIE,” three girls dressed similarly ran clumsily down the street towards her, wobbling in their own high shoes. The girl in the white dress, must have ran on ahead.

She laughed and waved at her friends from the puddle. No one else was left on the street. Sophie started dancing again, coughing between laughing shrieks. The group soon reached her and began scolding her loudly. She skipped onto the next puddle, shrieking now.

I pulled my scarf tighter over my head, smiling at the scene. I wasn't close enough see the group's faces but felt that I could see their expressions clearly. Sophie was smiling with her eyes closed, jumping around. Her friends' mouths were turned down in drunk frustration. Sophie's smile soon fell too into a frown. She kept jumping in the puddle, her feet now laced with muddy scratches—whimpering in rebellion on a rainy night.

April, Dublin

“Hey man do you've the coke there?” someone I didn't recognise asked Oscar.

“I think I gave it back to you.” They both patted their jeans pockets hurriedly.

“Fuck, no you definitely didn't. Are you serious?”

About 40 people were wedged into the kitchen, most of them lined against the peeling green cupboards and huddled around the fridge, chatting loudly to each other. The room had no kitchen table.

Tension swelled the cramped space as the two men rifled through their wallets. They looked through their things with one eye, the other focused on each other. The air started to heave and spark.

Myself and my friend Fiona said we were going to go the bathroom.

We passed a heated debate between a young man sitting on the counter-top and a woman. I think it was about the point in time in which bread becomes toast.

He was gesturing earnestly, pushing his shoulder-length blonde hair behind his ears every now and again. Her slim arms were folded over the strip of skin between her jeans and crop top. She was leaning back on her right foot. Every time he adjusted his position, she slightly adjusted hers.

We knocked on the bathroom door which was just off the kitchen. Three lads came out together, one of them holding his wallet.

Leaving the toilet, Fiona got trapped in a conversation with a man talking loudly about the *Lord of the Rings*. One of the people he was speaking to was looking down at her phone and scratching her arm. Another body was beside her, eyeing someone's abandoned can of cheap beer on the table behind the speaker. Fiona was listening to him, making eye contact and smiling when appropriate. She even looked sincere in her interest. I think the people like this might be the kindest in the world. I pushed past to escape, making my way towards the fridge where I had left my wine.

In front of it, Oscar was licking cocaine out of his house key. He stuffed the key into the pocket of his tight jeans and turned to the people nearest him.

“You know, I’ve been listening to a lot of rap music lately,” he said. I looked to the door, which was blocked by about 20 people. I looked back to the fridge and sighed.

“And yeah like I’ve just come to realise that without a doubt Kanye is the best artist of our generation,” he stopped.

“Yeah, yeah completely, completely,” said a deep voice belonging to someone in my course I hadn’t met yet. He was nodding vigorously and chewing gum. Tiny flakes of white powder hid between the hairs on his Cupid’s bow. I recognised him as the guy who twirled the ends of his anemic moustache during lectures. I asked Oscar to move so I could get my wine.

“Up Kanye 2020,” someone on the other side of the room shouted.

“I’d go so far as to say that every major album that has been released in the past ten years is if not a direct response to Kanye’s art at the very least a derivative of it,” said Oscar.

I took a long gulp from the bottle.

“What do you think?” He directed his question to Fiona, who had escaped from the Lord of the Rings conversation.

“Umm to be honest I wouldn’t be the best person to ask, I don’t mind rap but I’m not like super into it,” she said.

He nodded.

“Yeah, yeah I get it. Man, I’d really recommend it like it’s just the only genre out there that’s like actually creatively generative you know?” He placed a finger to his nostril and inhaled.

“And Kanye like ugh he’s a genius. Although now don’t take this the wrong way but maybe you have to be a lad to really get it you know? Like the whole rap bravado juxtaposed with all his insecurities. Like, he just grasped the entire male experience in one album you know?” Oscar smiled expectantly.

“That sounds really interesting, I might give it a go,” she said.

“Sorry, I hope I didn’t come off as misogynistic or anything, I really don’t mean to.”

Fiona laughed.

“Don’t worry, you’re grand I don’t think you’re sexist at all. I wonder where everyone has gone?” she looked around the stuffed room. Everyone we arrived with was missing.

“What the fuck man? Where have you been? None of us have had anything all night.” Oscar’s friend reappeared looking angry. He reached over me and put his arm on Oscar’s shoulder. They locked eyes, neither smiling. I wondered if they were going to fight.

“Oh, Jesus yeah I found it. Sorry, forgot to say,” Oscar pulled a post-card sized plastic bag from his back pocket and handed it over.

The room deflated. The other man laughed with relief, loosening his grasp on Oscar’s shoulder then patting it. He turned and pushed past the crowd, waving to a friend at the other side. I wondered for a moment if men and women are very different after all.

March, Galway

The only light in the car came from a small rectangular radio screen in the middle of the dashboard. It was a flat, black colour with RTÉ R1 shining out in white font.

I was listening to the announcement with my mother in the driveway. She was leaning back against the headrest with her eyes closed, her face turned towards me. She looked white, almost translucent under the light of the screen. Her hands were at her lap, fingers kneading each other. I saw rosary beads in her mind, moving quickly through her hands. Looking down, I noticed that my fingers were mimicking hers.

“It’ll be okay,” I said, scared more by her expression than the solemn announcement.

She said nothing, keeping her eyes closed for a few moments longer, looking for the first time like an old woman.

February, Dublin

For years, I thought the proverb ‘you can’t step into the same river twice’ was coined by the 1995 Disney film, *Pocahontas*. You can imagine how stupid I felt to discover it was about 2,500 years older than this, found in a fragment of a scroll written by the philosopher Heraclitus.

Heraclitus is said to have written just one single text which he deposited at the temple of Artemis at Ephesus. Everything that is known about his philosophy comes from fragments of this papyrus scroll. Its contents are bizarre and contradictory, believed by some to be part of a single coherent argument and others to be a collection of stand-alone epigraphs.

Of these hundred or so fragments, there are just three mentions of rivers. The most scrutinised says:

Into the same rivers we step and do not step, we are and are not.

What does this mean, if anything important? Scholars are divided. Some believe that his intention was because of change, we can never encounter the same thing twice.

Others say he had a more subtle idea in mind, that some things are the same only because they change.

I'm interested in the second part, 'we are and we are not.' Have we ourselves been changed just by entering a changing thing? Maybe all notions of consistency are comforting myths.

What interpretative significance is there that the proverb was put together from over a hundred scattered fragments? That it was translated from Ancient Greek? If what it says is true, then we can't encounter the fragment in the same way twice. But we only know this through its rediscovery. There is a poeticism to this, one ignored by philosophers as if unimportant.

Easter, Limerick

On Easter Sunday last year I was working in a pub near my house. It was large, dimly lit and empty except for three people sitting by the corner of the bar by the door. They were all there alone.

On the left was a woman, around mid-fifties, looking tired, her waterproof jacket still on. (No drink, just nuts.) The man in the centre had grey hair, around mid-forties. He was well-dressed, with vapid eyes. (Three jaeger-bombs, all at once.) A man in his mid-sixties or

so was standing on the right. He had a long grey-ponytail that brushed the top of his protruding arse-crack. His name, he said, was Johnny Fortune. (Beamish)

The man in the centre waved me over,

“Do you know who this is playing?” he gestured vaguely to the speakers in the corner of the bar. There was a bench there, with an array of DJ equipment in front of it. Staff working Sunday nights were privy to DJ Johnny Fortune’s infamous set. The man answered his own question before I had a chance to.

“It’s Prince, do you know Prince love?”

“Yeah, didn’t he die two years ago toda-” I started.

“I’ve loved Prince my whole life, my whole life since I was a kid” he said earnestly. “I remember buying my first album of his, sure he was already a star by then and I was only about sixteen I’d say. How old are you my love?”

His voice was broad with a pseudo-American accent. I guessed he had acquired the accent sometime in the past 10-15 years. He moved to America for work and raised his family there, bringing his children (two girls?) back to visit every two years. I thought they’d have matching charm bracelets with sterling silver shamrock charms and hate the rain. Maybe he was home for a few days by himself to visit his mother over Easter. Did she mind that he’s spending it at this depressing bar, arms cradling three full glasses of Jägermeister and red bull to his chest?

I smiled apologetically at him, “I’m twenty-one.”

“Aw you’re only a kid love, a baby,” he crooned, eyes glinting. “You wouldn’t know so.”

“Do you remember Prince?” He asked the woman to his left.

She nodded curtly, folding her empty peanuts’ wrapper twice over and smoothing out the creases. They returned to silence.

Johnny Fortune never ordered his pints from me. When he was finished his stout, he got the attention of the barman, if he was around, and pointed to his glass with a nod. The DJ didn’t sit down when he was drinking, which he always was. I thought it might be because he was afraid people would think he was taking the piss if he sat down at the bar during his set. DJ Johnny Fortune was a hardworking man, he wanted people to think. He took a slurp of his pint that drew his head back and sauntered back over to his equipment to change the song.

“New York, New York” blared through the sound system, dislodging some dust from the speakers and I checked my phone for the time. 11:10. At least another two hours before I’d get home. For fuck’s sake.

The music sounded padded. It bounced off a few edges of the bar before disappearing down the big empty seating area in the back. The pub, usually quiet, was ghostly empty on Sundays despite Fortune’s attempts to confuse local drinkers into thinking they were living out their wildest party fantasies on an exotic island instead of guzzling stout in a Limerick pub. On Easter Sunday mind you.

To achieve this ambitious feat of deception, Johnny Fortune shouted phrases including: “Sunday Night!”, “Are you ready?”, and particularly embarrassingly, “IBIZA!” during pauses in the remixed classic rock songs that comprised most of his set.

I was surprised to hear that regulars were shouting along in the smoking area outside. Usually they disappeared into the outdoor area for a timely fag when DJ Fortune started playing. Hearing that they were singing along to Sinatra their enthusiasm became clear. I stifled a laugh at their version. "Bangkok, Bangkok" was a take on the original "New York, New York" in reference to the six weeks Johnny Fortune spends partying in Thailand every year. I felt a pang of sympathy for Johnny Fortune, he must have known he was being mocked.

The self-named choir was made up of a group of six or seven men, in their late 20s from what I could tell. Some of them had been in the pub since 3pm. The manager had been giving out to one of them earlier for coming in in the same clothes he had on in the pub last night.

"If you don't go home tonight and change your clothes, I'm not letting you in tomorrow," she had told him, only half-joking.

Man-drinking-in-the-centre, Michael? I think I heard someone call him Michael earlier gestured for me to come over. His lips sponged white dribble and were moving slowly, but no words were coming out. I thought I should stop serving him, but was too nervous to refuse him.

He gestured for me to come closer. I craned my head a little further over the bar. He muttered something incoherent.

"Sorry?"

He did it again.

"Sorry I didn't catch th-"

“Take your clothes ofsf”

I sighed and stepped back but reprimanded him with no more than a stern look. I thought about how often I recount the advances of drunk customers to my friends. I tell people that I wish I could scream and curse at these men. I’m glad that I can’t. Rather than appearing cowardly, or as if I secretly welcome the attention, I can say that I don’t want to risk getting fired for yelling at customers. The principles I transgress to avoid conflict. I looked around to see if any other staff were nearby. They weren’t.

“Sorry no sees it’ssss likethe song, thePrince song.”

“Right,” I replied curtly, moving away from his side of the bar.

“Alright I’ll take my clothesss off” he decided.

The woman with the peanuts stood up and left, her neatly folded peanuts wrapper immediately springing out of its pleats, the silver catching the light of an overhanging lamp.

“Sorry don’t worry I won’t sorry don’t worry now.”

I took down fragments of the encounter in my notes, hearing my mother’s voice in my head telling me that all these experiences will make a bestselling novel one day. It didn’t seem so worth it.

February, Clare

It had been a year and a half since my last ocean swim. I was beginning to feel feverish. The prospect of the exhilarating catharsis that comes with swimming in Ireland’s freezing waters preoccupied me in the weeks leading up to my trip. I had been invited to spend a few days with friends in New Quay on our college reading week and was impatient.

New Quay is a tiny, beautiful village in the north of Clare, near the Galway border. The few buildings in the town all face the same way—the sea. They spread out across the coastline forming a long line, extending their arms to the stony beaches together.

On the train down, I was distracted from my reading by a pain in my lower calf. There was a deep cut on it from wearing ill-fitting boots to work a few days previously. The night before I had accidentally sliced the cut further with a razor when I was showering. It was shiny and raw, tinged yellow at the edges.

We arrived in the early afternoon and I decided to go for a walk on the rocks to get some fresh air. The ocean spray followed me across the grey slates, moving quickly hissing up from the sea like cold steam. Beside the point where the road ended, two copper monuments were drilled into the rocks. One was L-shaped with the outline of a wave on its arm, marking a point on the Wild Atlantic Way for tourists. The other was shorter and had a plaque with a Séamus Heaney poem etched into the stone. The poem, 'Postscript', was inspired by a drive through the area.

I walked for half an hour or so before turning and coming back the same way. The tide had come in and lapped all the way up to a narrow walkway. Sitting on the stones, I rolled up my jeans and eased my calf into the salt-water, feeling the water's stinging healing fizz on my cut.

When I came back my friends were all lounging in the sitting room reading. I sat down to join them with a battered red library copy of *Principia Ethica* for my upcoming essay. The room was filled with large windows facing the ocean. Reading with the sound of a gentle curdling sea, I felt that any learning was possible in such an environment.

At around half four in the afternoon we drove down to the beach for a swim, borrowed swimming togs pulling at the skin under our clothes. Pink streaks were running through the grey sky. The days were still short and the sky looked like it was being pulled at the sides, ready to close into night.

“What do you think?” Aoife asked me as we stepped out of the car. The water was dark-grey, ruffling against itself under the wind.

I grimaced in response, pulling the neck of my jumper up to my chin.

Smooth rocks covered the beach, glistening on a bed of grey sludgy sand. The entire landscape was fatally grey, its features visible only by subtle falls and fades. Dark sand fell into black water, silhouettes of rocky cliffs loomed over the cloudy horizon. Coldness emanated from every pore of the landscape, feeling like a space between worlds. It was everything that a beach should be.

Mila, Emma, Aoife’s mother Sheila and I pulled our layers and hobbled down onto the beach in bare feet. I remember how white our feet looked, clenched to the pale stones as we made our way to the water.

Sheila was versed in February swims and made it to the tide first, without drama, rubbing cold water on her arms and legs herself after getting ankle deep. Mila and Emma were behind me, hugging each other for warmth.

After the first shallow wave hit their feet they screamed, running back towards the stones with wide eyes and flapping arms. The three others, dressed in coats and scarves, laughed, taking pictures. I laughed too and stepped in, swallowing my gasps, in equal parts

headstrong and performatively courageous. The water was unbearably cold. An image floated to mind of a pack of dogs pulling the skin off the lower half of my body.

Sheila had already started to swim, stretching her arms long in the water, her white hair raised from the dark bath, glowing slightly. I took a breath and dove in after her, emerging with my hair plastered to my head, utterly exhilarated.

“You can tell who’s Irish,” Christian laughed from the beach, shivering in the wind.

“It’s lovely once you’re in!” I called back, lying.

We got out of the water quickly. My friends took pictures of me, shaking violently blue in front of the pink skyline. Back at the house in the shower I remember the first douse of hot water burning my skin, flattening the blonde hair on my arms that had stood like a legion of soldiers just moments ago.

That evening, we went down to the only pub in the village, Linnane’s. The place was empty we arrived except for two men. One was reading a newspaper at the bar and the other chatting to the barman in a cement thick Clare accent.

Sitting down at a table with five pints of Guinness, Aoife gestured quietly to the man who had caught my attention.

“You see him?”

We all looked over. He had grey hair that fell around his head and a woollen moth-riddled jumper. He was talking earnestly at the barman who responded with polite affirmations every now and again, his gaze elsewhere.

“His name is Paddy ‘the Thatch’.”

“Sorry, did you say, ‘the Thatch’?”

“Yeah, that’s his last name,” she said, and we all laughed.

“Yeah so apparently, thirty years ago he came to do a thatching job someone who lives here,” Aoife started explaining the story.

“Wait hang on, Paddy the Thatch isn’t from New Quay?”

“Yeah believe it or not that man is a blow in.” We all looked over at him again, he could have been part of the landscape outside, all grey and earnest and wild.

“Anyway, he came to thatch Mrs. O’Connor’s roof and said he’d do it for free if he could live in the shed thing in the back of her garden.”

“No way,” said Emma.

“I know and he just moved in and never left.”

We were baffled.

We spent the next while chatting and laughing, playing cards that I had brought with me.

After half an hour or so, Paddy wobbled over to our table, caught my eye and said something indistinguishable.

“Sorry?”

He repeated the question, gesturing with his hands and spilling a bit of his pint. His movements diverted my gaze to his right, where I noticed there was a framed photo of himself on the wall dated from the nineties. We looked at each other, all confused. I noticed that he was wearing the same jumper as in the photo.

“Do you know how to cut hay?”

We laughed as a group.

“No, I don’t,” I replied.

He kept talking, his words coated in a wet layer of drink, smiling, and waving at me.

The barman watched from behind the bar, amused at the scene.

“Cooking so what about cooking?” I realised this is what he was saying after a while.

“Not particularly.”

He looked shocked. “Jaysus what do you know?”

I shook my head to signify obviously very little.

“You’ll do the cooking and I’ll do the thatching...”

We laughed, shocked. He repeated the proposal a few more times in various ways.

We realised he was asking me to come live with him. Christian and Emma made a glance at me to make sure I wasn’t too uncomfortable.

After a few minutes of this Paddy started to sing, exposing a dark, toothless mouth producing a rough, but decidedly lyrical tune.

“Come to bed with me come to bed with me,” he raised his hand offering a dance and performing a little jig in front of our table.

“Is that a real song?” I replied in a weak voice.

We went back to the house around midnight and slept in until late the next day.

I thought about our ridiculous exchange for weeks afterwards. It furrowed itself into my mind as an invitation to another world. The world must only exist in memory—no, memory is too sensible. His reality is only possible through a shared imagination. One that has almost disappeared. I didn't and don't mourn its loss.

On the drive to the train station a white flurry of snow flew past the windshield, beginning to settle on the beach. I wondered if Paddy the Thatch had central heating. He probably had an open fire. I imagined it looked like a cottage from the 19th century that you can visit in folk parks, small, dark, and smelling of turf. I chastised myself for the vision of antiquity that sprung up from the recesses of my imagination when prompted with rurality.

My heart ached slightly for this Ireland, knowing my nostalgia was misplaced and this world fictional. It still hurt. The speed of the car made it seem like the snow was blowing against us, melting on impact. I remember thinking: does any real place exist where the wind catches hearts off guard, blowing it wide open? Maybe space needs to be injected with powdery doses of fiction to create any sense of magic. What harm.