

# Ireland of the Minds

edited by  
by Sven Kretschmar





## Ireland of the Minds. A Somewhat Personal Introduction

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*Ireland of the Minds* started the way any anthology should start: on a train in Italy, from where Fiorenzo Fantaccini contacted me to ask would I be interested to contribute a few poems of mine for the next issue of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*. The idea quickly developed into a mini anthology which I was supposed to edit – and I happily agreed. As we were already short in time when all of this happened, a decision was made against an open call and I reached out to poets I know personally. An open call for submissions might have been the preferable option, not least as it would have opened up the possibility of catching a greater diversity and wider range of literary voices writing about the island of Ireland, yet under the given circumstances such an approach would have come with the risk of receiving hundreds of poetry submissions. Given the timely constraints, I eventually decided against it to be able to treat the incoming contributions from my fellow poets with the respect and attention they deserve.

None of the contributors is originally from Ireland; some have made the island their permanent home, some others, like myself, have only lived there for a while and have since moved on to other countries. What unites us is that we all write about Ireland in one way or another – and that is what the poems gathered in here serve to show. Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe starts us off with her fine adaptation of the old Ulster myth of Mess Búachalla, a poem that almost dances with alliterative sounds and sheds a new light on a familiar story. Sound is what keeps us company in the second poem, by Niki Stammwitz, although scene and content change completely, bringing us from ancient tale to the contemporary wildness of Connemara landscapes where images of the bodies of human and land are merged. From there, we leap down to Cork where Adam Wyeth introduces us to what may or may not be military happenings and to “machine gun fire [...] charging in every direction”. With “The Sea Around Us”, Dominic Behan devoted an entire song to underline that Ireland is surrounded by water; it is thus no surprise that one

of the poems in here is set at a beach, namely Evgeny Shtorn's "Cat-Cloud", which brilliantly features the subtle (and, at times, not so subtle) humour Irish writers are often cherished for. It is heartening to see this tradition, if one may call it that, carried on by ever new writers, and that Irish humour, if there is something as genuine as that, is understandable beyond the watery borders of the Emerald Isle and can so easily and elegantly be picked up by writers from elsewhere who have come to make a new life for themselves in Ireland. The next poem we are to take delight in is Kara Knickerbocker's ode to the Black Pool – or Duibhlinn, as the Celts called Dublin. It is a romantic poem, not a romanticising one, capturing perfectly what both Dubliners and guests of all kinds will experience every now and again when they take a gander at the city centre, possibly while going to one of the places there that sell certain beverages many a Dublin street song has been written about.

Make no mistake, however, the Irish capital is not only brimming with joy and pleasure. It has unpleasant and uneasy sides too as Chiamaka Enyi-Amadi reminds us in her imminent and timely prose poem on the terrible death of George Nkencho on 30 December 2020. It is a poem on the "epidemic called Racism" many migrants in Ireland are familiar with. Tourists, particularly white or white-passing ones, might often be greeted with a warm *céad míle fáilte*, yet those who come to live in Ireland permanently, regularly see themselves faced with the same overt and covert prejudices and ill will as in other countries subsumable under the socio-geographical term "Western culture". For both people working in academia and in the arts it should be of great interest to not only continuously remind ourselves of the severe threats and problems posed by racism and, for that matter, misogyny, antisemitism and other forms of misanthropy. We are well-advised to teach our students about all of the above as it will help to make a difference already in the near future when they go to study or work abroad for their credit points, or even seek permanent jobs outside their home countries – whether their destination will be Ireland or not.

Our poetic journey continues with a poem by Brazilian-born poet and translator Rafael Mendes. He has us stay in Dublin for a little longer, which allows us a short glimpse at the "intimate puzzles" the poet finds on public transport. This poem reminds us that one does not need to have been raised in a certain place to be able to become a chronicler of it, if only for the length of a morning's tram ride. The poem following Rafael's is my own contribution taking us to Belfield. It has a double Irish background, so to say: for one thing, it was written in a workshop facilitated by Galway poet Kevin Higgins, one of Ireland's sharpest satirists. What is more, it tries to capture the manifold of impressions I made as post-graduate student in University College Dublin's School of Philosophy. In a condensed way, I have tried to capture some of the challenges young academics and junior researchers in Ireland have to face, namely being "slaves / of external funds and short-term contracts". It is much to my regret to hear and read over and again that situation, at least at UCD, has not significantly improved since the time I left.

In "Two Worlds", Polina Cosgrave relates what is going on outside her door to the outside of other places. A significant change happens "In another world" – a line that might bring to memory Derek Mahon's renowned "Elsewhere" switch in *The Snow Party*. What Mahon achieves with one word Cosgrave achieves with three. Do not let this lead you to believe that her turning point is any weaker; it is, at least in my opinion, of comparable strength as it transports readers not only to a different geographical setting, but decidedly and explicitly to a different world – maybe to the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States or to crowds taking to Belarussian streets to demand democracy and the end of police brutality. But see for yourself what you will find in Polina's poem and, of course, in the poems of the other contributors.

The second to last poem comes from Susan Millar DuMars, a US-born poet and short story writer. In it she catches excellently the lonesomeness many migrants have experienced and are experiencing, if only between whiles, in the land of the one hundred thousand welcomes. The closing point of this mini anthology is marked quite suitably by Eva Michely's "When I Leave Northern Ireland", a piece taking inspiration from Colette Bryce's trademark poem "When I Land in Northern Ireland". Eva's is as personal and, being aware of the literary connectedness with the UK part of the island, I delight in seeing her call Northern Ireland, "here"; for me, personally, it is a wonderful reminder of Glenn Patterson's *Here's Me Here* – and the inscription he wrote into my copy of that book when he was visiting Saarland University in Saarbrücken during his Irish Itinerary reading tour of Germany. Maybe it is anecdotes like this one which remind us that Ireland is known as a place of emigration; it is good to see it has broadened its portfolio to be a place of immigration too – be it through people arriving there in search of a permanent home or people who, like myself and, quite likely, many others, come to live there only for a while, and, upon leaving, make Ireland a home of the minds.

In 2019, I had the good fortune of being included in the *Writing Home: The 'New Irish' Poets* anthology by Dedalus Press. Two years on, it is a great delight to be able to include some of my fellow "writing homers" in *Ireland of the Minds* – and to even be able to reach out, to go beyond that scope by working with further poets, some of them long since established, some others at the very beginning of their literary development. I hesitate to use the word career as it sounds so very business-like, and we all know, for most of us there is not enough money in literature, particularly in poetry, to call it a business. Be that as it may, it is my firm hope that the readers of this mini anthology will enjoy the poems as much as I did, and as much as I enjoyed working with those wonderful humans I am proud to call fellow poets. Maybe in time we will see them being added to the canon of Irish literature, which, by extension, would then include literature *from* Ireland and literature *about* Ireland. And that is what I take *Ireland of the Minds* to mean: a perception of a place shaped by the people living there as well as by people not living there, people from the past who, through whatever historical effects, influence the contemporary perception of the place, as well as people of the present, who can connect a place's histories and stories with the ways that place reveals itself to them in the here and now. In that regard, *Ireland of the Minds* might serve as a steppingstone to discover further poems (and prose texts) by the authors gathered together below, and as an incentive to get immersed in even more contemporary writing from and about the island of Ireland to participate in more perspectives and thus, maybe – hopefully – to get a fuller picture of the many meanings the word *Ireland* might be loaded with.

6 April 2021  
Schwalbach, Germany

“Morning”  
*after Mess Búachalla*

*Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe*

to say the boy was born of forbidden  
tryst given to desire to spill the story  
of the clandestine would be blasphemy  
so she keeps this to herself for what  
could be greater than being believed?

to recall how the dark creature glided  
through the skylight, monstrous, bloody  
changeling, to confide she was repulsed  
yet secretly slain by the serene speckled  
eyes to tell of how it consumed her then

to divulge how it held her down, heavy  
rough claw spidered slant boned blades  
sharp billed starling, cutting into flesh,  
to smile as the piercing mouth drew red  
near the trapped birds of her collarbones

to admit how she adored the bestial avian  
body, feathers dry and thrashing inside her  
throat, to shout! for pleasure, to sing this  
rapture of arousal: how she fashioned life  
from a singular rib — hollow, light as air.

“Where I Am at Home”

*Niki Stammwitz*

The soil's songs muted by concrete; dandelions breathe  
Heavily through dusty cracks in the pavement,  
Their lungs laden with the burden of convenience.

Running uphill inside a ribcage clothed in bark, I pray  
Falling leaves, dry rasping rustle do not predict  
A burst of yellow-brown pulmonary alveoli.

I chase my breath to the top, then stop.  
On the plain, a gust of memory swirls me back in time:

Soft melodies rise from soggy patches of wind-combed,  
Sea-seasoned grass like the firm air of a flutist;  
Grey clouds and white spray join in to tap-dance me closer to the cliff;  
Eyes, ears fiddled into paralysis; solely  
My lungs fill with salty swathes of boundless blue.

Feverish violins push me to the ground, make me smell the jig, taste  
Portach móna; lichens weave me into the garland skirting sheep pastures  
As a crystal voice of a woman caresses my hair and that of  
My grass sisters, bursts forward its unabashed Celtic syllables,  
Each one ploughing over the land, the cliffs, enlarging its realm  
Like the first breath of a newborn.

I fill my lungs with a gasp of Connemara symphony,  
Prepared to hold it for a while.

“A Million Tanks in Cork”

*Adam Wyeth*

When I first heard it, collecting  
my change, I imagined an army  
of truculent, armoured vehicles  
elbowing down Carey’s lane,

flattening passers-by like an end-  
is-nigh, apocalyptic movie. The image  
blew up like a city fire in my mind.  
Perhaps it was an Irish curse,

an innate aversion to my right angled  
accent buffeting against the soft curves  
of their rain-washed burrs.  
Till I noticed everyone shooting

the breeze with it for the smallest  
exchange: a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine,  
each one passing it on like the Eucharist  
or a virus that had got out of hand;

then saw it for what it was: a fusillade  
of gratitude, an inquisition of appreciation,  
the machine gun fire of obligation  
charging in every direction.



“Cat-Cloud”

*Evgeny Shtorn*

I was sitting  
on the beach  
the other day,  
the sky was almost totally clear,  
but a small cloud hid the sun.

I thought that this cloud  
should be called ‘cat-cloud’,  
as it sits  
precisely  
in the only spot  
where it is in the way,  
and, being so small,  
it is able to hide the sun.

“How I Knew You, Dublin”

*Kara Knickerbocker*

before you wore the slit high dress,  
showed the length of your curved streets,  
grit of your teeth in the east.

When you worked into dawn  
until the Liffey flowed out your mouth  
like breath in peaceful sleep.

I knew you steady as pulsed music  
from Grafton’s strong heart  
lifting into the loud night,

after these soles stuck  
like spilled pints of Guinness  
to beer-soaked wooden floorboards.

I knew you at once,  
like St. Patrick’s spire face  
through the afternoon clouds,

or when I saw Stephen’s  
Green in your eyes,  
and I can’t, could never  
unknow you now—

“Exile”

*Chiamaka Enyi-Amadi*

After a year-long exile to the nooks and crannies of our homes, we find ourselves still stranded in the island of our abodes, condemned to more days of glitchy video calls, an unhealthy pick-and-mix of our social media feeds and news-cycle pills – a daily dose of COVID death-updates. What we do know is we are living with an invisible virus in our midst, capable of wiping out our entire species. Nonetheless, we are grateful for loved ones being safe and sound, just a phone call away, for being able to transform our bedrooms into workshops at the touch of a button. Thankful for open fields and cold air, for well-tended gardens and wildflowers sprouting by the seaside.

While we ached for brighter days, an old foe came calling in May. Another epidemic called Racism had grown wings and taken flight across the Western world, migrating from Minneapolis to a Dublin suburb. In outrage, we took to the streets to protest, leaving our doors unguarded as an animal called grief wandered into our homes reeking of decades of systemic oppression. Anyone who saw us must have thought we were dancing<sup>1</sup>. Our flailing arms and upturned faces, the way we wield our voices like weapons and swing our Black Lives Matter banners, sweat-drenched, teeth gritted with determination, and our eyes gleaming with hope for a better future. Were we not almost buried alive – as we burrowed deeper into the dirt – desperate to unearth a miracle, to make wine from the bitter fruits of a near-barren year?

Grief is a ravenous animal, rabid and roaming around a parched wasteland; the poet is a fly perched on the tail of that wild, wounded thing. How could they understand our dilemma? Why we hesitated, misty-eyed as the flames clawed at our curved backs, curious to glimpse once more the red glow of many days past and passing swiftly. We waited, hovering over the world as we’ve known it, and watched as it was levelled by fire and brimstone. And standing there, with the old world burning to our rear, we clutch each other’s calloused hands and point our eyes at the glorious gloaming of a new dawn. The verdant valleys glistening with morning dew, the wind kissing our cheek, welcoming us with a familiar song sweet as a nursery rhyme, or perhaps an ancient battle cry.

<sup>1</sup> Line adapted from Wisława Szymborska-Włodek’s (1923-2012) poem, “Lot’s Wife”.

“Luas Return Ticket”

*Rafael Mendes*

Neither sign of sun nor cold.  
Seagulls clocking the roster,  
berries tapping the neighbour’s wall,  
news of yet another hopeful day.

“Mom is cold”, “What a little nice  
dog you have”, “Radio nova one hundred”,  
sounds of the maturing day still finding  
its bellybutton, forming the syllabus  
of its twenty-four hours life.

Then rain and cold,  
spots of dirt marking our boots,  
cold hands holding cups of tea  
as if it was a prayer for a dead goddess.

Now the clean sky’s floor birthing  
a shy sun not spreading its arms,  
dank coats hanging in our chairs,  
crippled umbrellas packed in the bin.

A return ticket wasted at the journey’s end,  
pilled over other schedules, blood tests,  
half chocolate bar, orange powered by Lucozade,  
ultimately — pieces of intimate puzzles.

“Philosophy of Instead”  
*after Charles Baudelaire*

*Sven Kretzschmar*

Read Philosophy, relentlessly.  
 There is no point, except: everything’s matter  
 in flux. *Panta rhei* is possible  
 only in time. If you would not feel

the past speed of A- and B-Series crush you  
 between clock-face, present and hand –  
 philosophise, recklessly.  
 The ethics

of prospective responsibility, phenomenology  
 of jet lags. A Philosophy of Instead.  
 And if sometimes, on the shelves of a library,  
 or in a seminar room overlooking the campus

green, or in the self-chosen solitude  
 of a high-profile symposium, you awaken  
 and find terminology-packed language  
 half or entirely cryptic, ask of entities,

universals, of a coffee break, of tenure-tracks,  
 or at least concluding drinks,  
 or of a Hegelian synthesis of any of the former,  
 ask of all the flies, of all that is

yet unspoken. Ask what happiness is.  
 And entities and language and drinks  
 and G.W.F. will answer you:  
 “Happiness is to read philosophy. Read Philosophy,

if you would not be the martyred slaves  
 of external funds and short-term contracts;  
 Philosophise regardless. With Epicurus,  
 with Marquard or Förster, as you please.”

## “Two Worlds”

*Polina Cosgrave*

Deserted town  
outside my door –  
a quiet afternoon.  
Phantom whispers  
in the playground,  
sun shining for no one but me.  
A frozen bag of dog shit  
but no dogs  
outside my door.  
They only howl at night,  
that's how I know they live around.  
No kids on bicycles,  
no teenage girls  
smoking in the lane,  
chirping like little birds.  
No seagulls arguing  
outside my door  
looking for some treats,  
always ready to take off.  
Light is eating my eyes out  
with the big spoon of its omnipresence  
outside my door.  
Wind sucking on my breath.  
In another world  
people are marching  
shoulder to shoulder in a pandemic.  
I know some faces:  
I was married to that man,  
and all these wrinkles on his forehead are new;  
that woman's lips used to move in such a way  
I almost believed she loved me back.  
Her features distorted now.  
I watch thousands being synchronized,  
they keep up with each other's grief.  
The air full of lies  
outside their doors.  
This weather  
turns their faces inside out, or maybe  
the batons of police do.  
They march because there is no peace  
outside their doors,  
inside their doors.  
Detuned music of the future  
calls them to the streets  
to break the bones of yesterday.  
For everything is stolen  
including  
their doors.  
So they go out to kiss each other  
and play soccer  
with policemen's helmets.  
Meanwhile,  
my life is lying on the crossroads  
with its skirt hiked up.

“Six O’clock in Galway”

*Susan Millar DuMars*

An old woman, picked clean,  
whispers in the washroom  
of Ceannt Station.

A man at the bus stop asks if  
I am lonely.

His red t-shirt strains against  
his saggy belly.

*We are far from home*, he says.

*I’m Pakistani.*

*You’re from the US, yes?* From this  
he thinks he knows me.

We’re on the lip of Eyre Square, face  
into its mouth.

Its beery breath, its twilight sighs.

The Angelus.

*My family has disowned me,*  
the Pakistani says.

The houses on Prospect Hill  
kneel like penitents,  
picked clean.

“When I Leave Northern Ireland”

*after Colette Bryce*

*Eva Michely*

When I leave Northern Ireland I want heavy rain,  
the damp in cars and clothes seeping into bones, coming out at bedtime in shivers  
through the belly. Want bedsheets and knee socks pulled up high; the high drama of water  
hitting window hard.

Great drying and brave skies are for another day. I wish the weather would oblige me  
when leaving here behind.

What is it brings you here some ask and I go on (and on) about writing, books and friends.  
(Ever harder, the full truth.) I don't mention glacial wedges and puddles of bog water nor  
hills rising above street level and heavy tarmac kissed by rain. I do not say here  
strikes a chord with me that is not touched upon elsewhere. I do not say I  
bring my love, my loneliness,  
no less.