

PART ONE

Blood and Bone



CHAPTER ONE

Leamhain Bhána – White Moths

YOU ARE STANDING ON THE banks of a river that you may have never seen before – that you may, in fact, never see. This river courses along a line that cuts the land up like a body; this river is a border invisible to the living.

The land is as still as it was in the very beginning, back when the ice melted away, and the light that it holds is folding itself into everything around you. Into the edges of the grey-blue water, into the ancient, lichen-covered rocks, into the gaps in between things, into you as you stand inside the vast, bright silence.

It is the winter solstice. The year is getting itself ready to turn; the land that you are held by is holding its breath. You and that land are making ready to wait. Snow, not yet here, is on the wind, hidden in a part of the sky you cannot see. All at once, from no place at all – softly and without any sign – comes the cinematic beating of wings, powerful and haunting. The salmon-pink December sky above, for the most fleeting of moments, is a world all of its own, a place unlike any you have ever known before.

You are standing on the banks of a river that has witnessed things that neither you nor I could ever begin to name.

You are standing on the banks of the River Foyle – at a place where north is south and where south is north – as a perfect V of whooper swans calls you home, back to that thin place in between.

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Time, as we know it, is the original shape-shifter. Now the line of it runs straight as an old railway track; now it is a circle – many circles, in fact. Now it dances without moving – to and fro across millennia – around the whole turning world, filling the night sky with bounding green lights. Past, future, present: the unbidden, ineffable gift of it all. Memory is like a white moth in flight. Sometimes she comes so close that we can see the light falling into the hidden parts of ancient markings. On other days we cannot see her but we feel the delicate wing-beat down deep, in beside our bones.

The story, our own, is a shared one, of the lines and circles of the land we know, of the sorrow it has known and of our own white moth of memory.

Moths have been flying in the skies of this earth for millions of what we call years; some may even have been around for 190 million of these markers of passing eras, these dividers of time we have created by which to record and to remember.

The lands and the seas above which they have journeyed have changed vastly in this time; they are changing still. The

land I know best, Ériu, Éire, Ireland – ‘the goddess’ – was often completely covered in a cloak of ice. The ice melted back then, as it continues to melt today. Now there is no part of the interior of Ireland that is further than seventy miles from the sea. This goddess-island is bounded by a two-thousand-mile coastline, one of ever-changing moods, fringed by rocky coves and beaches, dotted with clusters of islands of various sizes, more than one island for every day of the year. The outline of Ireland has been buffeted since its earliest days by the wild Atlantic Ocean, creating a seaboard of unrivalled beauty. The sea, the winds and the ice of millennia have worked together to sculpt a landscape that is as raw as it is gentle, full of nuance.

The earliest record of human presence on this island is from 12,500 years ago. In the fifth century CE, the island was Christianised, and by the twelfth century – following a Norman invasion – a neighbouring body of land, England, had claimed sovereignty. Two centuries and two decades ago, in 1801, the island became part of the United Kingdom through the Acts of Union. In the century that followed, the land and sea saw a War of Independence, which ended with the partition of the island. In May of 1921, just as the bluebells would have been filling the land with colour, Ireland was cut up into two parts – the ‘Irish Free State’ in the south of the island, and Northern Ireland, which remained a part of the United Kingdom, linked to the larger island across the water. The Irish border, that invisible line that cuts this island in two, has been around for a single century. A small speck of dust from the wing of a moth, a wee gap in a fossil found on a beach, that line that

has defined the lives – and resulted in the deaths – of so many people has been around for the whole of my lifetime. Europe is defined, in many ways, by borders. They speak of crumbled empires, shifting boundaries – most of them, certainly the Irish border, speak of unimaginable suffering.

Eon, era, period, epoch: we are a race that has long sought to break things up, to divide, to separate, to draw lines between things that might otherwise have remained as one. My grandfather, one of the most important people in my life, was born less than a handful of days before this island was divided in two. The year I was born, Madonna's song 'Borderline' reached number one in Ireland. My island was the only place in the whole wide world where this song gained such acclaim. Madonna's 'borderline' was a made-up boundary which her love kept being pushed over. My borderline runs for 310 miles, cutting through walls, farms, lakes, rivers, roads, villages and bridges. My borderline is geographical in that it roughly follows water courses, in accordance with remnants of seventeenth-century county limits. My borderline is, in reality, a political line no one can fully understand, no matter how strongly the charcoal strokes have been laid on the page.

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I am in my first year at primary school in my divided, broken city of Derry. I am living in the Waterside – the mostly Protestant side of town – in a rough, sectarian council estate. My parents are in their very early twenties. I had come along when they

were teenagers. They were unmarried and had known each other less than a year when I was whispered of. Something they *did* know of one another – in spite of this shared future they now had in common – was their vastly different pasts. My mother is Catholic, my father Protestant. In the early 1980s in the city of Doire-Derry-Londonderry, at the height of the period of unthinkable violence known as ‘the Troubles’ such a pairing was exceptionally rare. Division between the two sides – Protestant and Catholic – was very much the norm. Folk from either side of the River Foyle – a natural boundary which easily marked out where your individual background allowed you to safely walk – went to school separately, to church, to sports events, funerals and pubs separately. If you had to think of a place where members of both of these divided communities mixed, it was in hospital rooms. We all came into that divided city – walled, built on the oak-fringed banks of the River Foyle – together, and we all left in the same way, no matter which side of the water we had our roots. Derry, the city I was born in and now live in again, is a mostly Catholic city. It was severely affected by the Troubles between 1968 and the Good Friday Peace Agreement of 1998. The actual conflict is widely accepted to have started in this city – right inside its beating heart, in a Catholic residential area known as the Bogside.

Catholics had started to become increasingly unhappy with the preferential treatment being given to the Protestant, mostly unionist, members of society. Jobs and housing – the basics of human rights – were hugely different depending on your

surname, and people had had enough. The 1960s, with all its focus on equality, hit the city of Derry hard. No one could really have imagined what would come out of it all though. That is, no one except those who had been living through poverty, inequality and imposed foreign rule. Peaceful marches turned into violent carnage. The RUC, the Protestant police force in the North back then, were filmed beating people – Catholics – with batons. Things escalated: loyalists from the Protestant side attacked housing rights protesters and the police stood by and watched. Catholic men – residents of the Bogside – were beaten to death by the police and died in the only hospital we have, their deaths caused by the only police force we have, the one that was supposed to protect them. The residents of the Bogside swore to never allow the police to enter the estate again. Things began to go from bad to worse.

Paramilitary groups were now operating on both sides of Northern Ireland's sectarian divide, while these essential civil rights marches became increasingly dangerous to attend. In the middle of all this tension, the Protestant, unionist Orange Order's marching season had begun. Following the annual Apprentice Boys' march in August 1969, civil unrest in Belfast became a three-day explosion of nationalist rioting in Derry.

The 'Battle of The Bogside', three days of serious violence in this housing estate, resulted in the arrival of a small body of British troops. What the media across the water were telling us was that the government of Northern Ireland was fast losing its grip on security. We didn't need them to tell us that we were not safe.

A blizzard of reforms came along, including the setting up of a variety of bodies to allocate council housing, to investigate the violence and review policing. The findings made it clear that things were not working and needed to change. This was not the story that had been told in the North of Ireland for many years. The old lore was no longer holding sway, and nothing could ever again be how it once had. Outraged loyalists responded with yet more civil unrest and violence, attacks on Catholic areas escalated, and many homes were burned.

In late 1969, the more militant ‘Provisional’ IRA broke away from the ‘Official’ IRA. This group was prepared to pursue unification of the island of Ireland, and would use violence to tear the unwanted border up from the land and the sea, to throw it back over the water, back to where it was sent from.

At the same time, loyalist paramilitaries were also organising. The Ulster Volunteer Force was joined by the Ulster Defence Association, which rapidly expanded to a membership of tens of thousands.

In the middle of it all was the British Army. There was by this stage no hope of stopping the violence that had spilled out of the cracks in the North of Ireland, the sharpest and most splintered shards of which had buried themselves in my hometown of Derry, right on that invisible, contentious border.

At the end of January in 1972, the army deployed the Parachute Regiment to deal with rioting at another civil rights march in Derry. The protest, like all of them, had been peaceful. The footage – almost unbearable to watch – along with eyewitness reports, shows hands being held up, of obedience and

fearful fleeing, as those in charge act in a way that might only be termed as unimaginably inhumane. Thirteen demonstrators were shot and killed by troops, with another person dying later from their wounds. 'Bloody Sunday' will go down in the history of this city as one of its most horrific, traumatising and haunting days. The loss, confusion, fear and anger that sparked out of the fires of that harrowing day resulted in 'direct rule' – Northern Ireland would be governed from Westminster. It has remained that way ever since, even with devolution, in the eyes of many, when push comes to shove.

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I was born into the middle of this violence, at its exact midway point: 1983. Although no one could have known it, on that cold winter's day in Derry. No one has even an inkling, back then, but they are halfway through those dark years. They are over the hump of the hill. The violence that has been filling their every waking day, their every sleepless night, will be brought to an end. The kidnapping and terrorising, the bombing and burning, the mauling and murdering, is not going to last for ever. We do not know yet the journey that the land on which we live, and all of us who live on it, will make. We do not yet know the lengths and breadths, the words and actions, the negotiating that will be required to take us from being a land of violence to a land of (more or less) peace. Some of us, in fact, may never know the ins and outs of this process, our journey towards peace in the North of Ireland, our Peace

Process. We will not know of the words whispered between people, between humans that had never broken breath to one another before. We may never know of the bargains and sacrifices made, of the leaps of something – something unthinkable – that were taken. Leaps of something that feels much stronger, even, than sheer ‘faith’. That border has seen it all – every last trace of the violence, bloodshed, silence, trust – the peace that has been carefully and sensitively shaped. A peace as delicate as the wings of a moth.

My grandfather was born in the same week as the Irish border. He was a storyteller, and his most affecting tales, the ones he gave me that have shaped my life, were about *place*, about how we relate to it, to ourselves, and to one another. Good *seanchaidhthe* – storytellers – never really *tell* you anything, though. They set the fire in the hearth; they draw the chairs in close; they shut all the windows so the old lore doesn’t fall on the wrong ears. They fill the room with a sense of ease, a sense of all being as it should be. The words, when they spill quietly out of the mouth of the one who has been entrusted with them, dance in the space, at one with the flames of the fire. It is, as always, up to those who listen to do with them what they will.

The stories he shared were fleeting, unbidden; they came and went as quickly as the bright, defiant end sparks of a fire, well on its way to going out. The stories, those glowing embers of words, were about places that are known to hide away, sometimes from all view. As if their locations are to be found in between the cracks, or floating above the thick grey Atlantic.

Places that he mostly didn't even have names for but that he could conjure up as though they were right there in the same room. He called such places 'skull of a shae'. Now, I have come to think of the shae as 'shade', a nod to the almost ghost-like nature he saw such places as having. The places he spoke of seemed to scare him, a wee bit, or maybe it was talking about them that unsettled him. He came from a strict and hard background that allowed very little room for the voicing of much beyond the grind of being alive. I will remember, always, how he spoke of paths, particularly ones he found when walking across the border from Derry into Donegal. Paths on which friends and he had seen and heard things they were never really able to understand.

The places he spoke of were locations where people felt very different from how they normally do. Places from which people came away changed. In these places you might experience the material and spiritual worlds coming together. Blood, worry and loss might sit together under the same tree as silence, stillness and hope. He spoke, not often but with raw honesty, of places where people had found answers and grace, where they had learned to forgive, where they had made peace and room for healing. Places where a veil is lifted away and light streams in, where you see a boundary between worlds disappear right before your eyes, places where you are allowed to cross any borders, where borders and boundaries hold no sway. Lines and circles, silence and stillness – all is as it should be for that flickering gap in time. He never named the places, of course, and the first time he brought me to one – Kinnagoe Bay – on

a soft, pink August afternoon in the late 1980s, he never spoke of any of this at all. He quietly read his magazine about pigeon racing, poured my granny's tea, and let me be.

This August in 2019, decades after that first experience with a thin place in my grandfather's company, just days after I returned from another thin place across the water, British politics reached what may go down in history as one of its darkest days.

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I was in the Waterside in Derry. I was in the border town I grew up in, one that has, in recent years, found itself caught up in a spiralling chaos of Brexit negotiations that seem as if they will never settle. That August afternoon almost half a year ago, I was by the fire in my rented house, caught between two heavy showers of Atlantic rain. The BBC shared with us all that the government had asked the Queen to suspend Parliament. It was only a handful of weeks before the Brexit deadline, October 2019 – the date on which, for three years, we had been told the UK would leave the EU. We had no idea then – not a single one of us – how any of the coming weeks, months or years would look for the islands of the United Kingdom. The single issue that has caused – and is still causing – unrivalled difficulty, is the question of the Irish border. Almost every politician has been able to agree on one thing – there is never going to be an easy way out of this mess when it comes to that invisible line.

We are all standing together looking out at an unknowable thing. Some of us already know what that utter terror, that dark and traumatising uncertainty, feels like. Some of us have lived through things on the same level – rather, some of us have already *survived* such times. Some of us who grew up during the unsettled, devastating – horrifying – Troubles feel those ripples on our insides start to move again. Some of us left at the first chance we got, and we never looked back. Some of us stayed – following the paths of our parents and our peers – never learning another way, steering our ships always towards the same violence and anger that we knew and understood, keeping the same wounds open from the past that nearly broke us. Some of us, though, some of us ran away, and then – somehow – found a way back. Now we watch from the sidelines in horror. The North of Ireland voted against leaving the EU in the referendum of 2016. Our votes mattered not a single jot. Our peace – worth more than anyone can verbalise – is in the hands of people who act as though we do not even exist. Who is to say we will not again witness atrocities the kind of which we have already seen, if we matter as little as we did back then?

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On a wet night last month, in October 2019 – a few months after the suspension of Parliament by Boris Johnson, a handful of weeks before the UK was due to leave the EU – I went into my concrete backyard in search of the only patch of cloudless sky, in search of stars.

Earlier that day, before the rain had properly set in, I'd gone for a run. Instead of running my usual route – along the River Foyle to look for the same herons and lapwings, the same light on the same reeds – I felt compelled to run a different route in the park. The news that day was so harrowing, full of politics that seemed to grow darker by the hour.

I took my anxious body a different path. I made my way around the football pitch instead of along the stream, up a hill with empty energy drink cans and one discarded stiletto, into a wee copse. Burnt grass and shards of glass from Tesco own-brand vodka bottles, no light to be found at all. And then she came, wild and beautiful, in flight in the least likely of settings – a mottled brown and white moth. I followed her path above broken glass bottles – things that speak of the addiction and poverty that are already here, which looks like it will worsen in the future that lies ahead. Broken things that spoke of our need. Then she was above a dash of red – the first fairy ring I had ever seen in Ireland. Later, before the night fell, I looked her up and found that she was an Oak Beauty. She is very specific to this wooded, broken city of mine. Even as I thought I was open of mind and eye, the moth that afternoon told me to come closer still, tells me – even now – that all is not lost in this place, not yet.

Nature is not somewhere we go into. Nature is not just 'my' river, or the tundra, the highlands, an island, an empty beach or a perfectly sculpted woodland. Nature is not always silent and a bringer of healing. It is not for any one type of person, with any particular background. Nature is the burnt grass that

birthed those almost unreal fly agaric, that fairy ring. It is that moth as she jolted me out of my (creeping in) small-mindedness, and desire to box her off. It is the humans of my hometown who are responding to trauma through addiction: the human desire to feel numb sometimes, to ease the worry and the pain, and the sadness, just for a wee while. I hope that the moth danced for them, too – whoever drank and smashed those bottles – and that they noticed her.

Slowly, that autumn night, burning through the grey fog, the stars appeared. Then, under the stars, close enough that I could feel it in my bones, there was a loud deep shot. Then a siren. I awoke the next morning to find out that the sound was a bomb, one street over from mine.

I am not ready for this again, none of us are. I blustered about the house, sinking into the depths, a place I cannot bear to reach again. I can't live through it again, that much I know.

I watched a spider pushing her eggs from the shower switch to the crack in the corner of the bathroom ceiling, slowly, with intention – the egg sac the same colour as a robin's egg, the same colour as my eyes after crying.

I lit the fire, cursing the storm that raged outside on that afternoon, head full of worry about the melting, the burning, the breaking, full of guilt at my part in it all. The flames had seemed almost to dance in time with the howling winds that were shoving the trees around outside, and I remember how comforted I felt by it, by the fact that the winds still howl, and that I still love them, despite it all. It is still there, that breaking and bruising – that sorrow and deep, dark ache – but

I am listening now, with everything I have. I am trying to find the way through.

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At the age of eight Beatrix Potter was already studying and recording a wide variety of creatures in a sketchbook she herself had made. She was particularly drawn to the delicate form of insects, becoming a keen amateur entomologist at a young age. Potter made frequent visits to the Natural History Museum to sketch their insect collection. Then she would return home, where she learned to prepare slides of specimens to view under a microscope.

At the age of eight in February 1992, I heard, in very hushed voices, the news of a mass shooting in Belfast. Members of the UDA, a loyalist paramilitary group, opened fire, killing five people and wounding another nine. All the victims were local Catholic civilians. Less than an hour after this, my dad's 'Video Van' – our family's sole source of income on our impoverished Protestant housing estate – was driven through British army checkpoints. My father was at the wheel of the van, under the enforced direction of armed loyalist paramilitaries. He has never to this day spoken to anyone about the words the unwanted passengers said to him. About how it felt to be told what to do, where to drive, by someone carrying a loaded gun; someone who could take your life at any moment they chose. When he made it home, nothing felt like it had before he left. Nothing has ever felt the same since.

I knew something bad had happened because my dad didn't go out that night in the van. He didn't go out again for quite a long time. My memories of that year are fairly hazy, as things went from bad to worse politically in Derry, but I do know that in that same year, at the same age as Beatrix Potter, I too was given my own microscope. Suddenly, in that concrete 'garden' on a council estate in a city tearing itself to shreds, another world opened itself up, and let me come in.

I hope you never find yourself in a situation where you need to protect a child from witnessing bloodshed in the very streets on which they have no choice but to live. But if you ever should, I urge you, find books about wild creatures for them, find them a microscope, a magnifying glass, anything at all that helps the unknown make sense. It doesn't matter how broken the surroundings may be, how bombed-out, how terrifying every single bit of it all may be. Just find them a way to sit in muck, as creepy-crawlies do their do, as bees buzz through holes in concrete walls, as spiders build webs on empty coal bunkers under a sky that – no matter how grey and uncertain – holds room for butterflies, moths, dragonflies and things too hard to find words for.

Every February I have dreams of the February I have just recounted. *This* February, during a fierce Atlantic storm, I took my own van from Derry along the coastline, across that border of increasingly tumultuous clamour, to Sligo. When I awoke from a night of dreaming *in* a van, I had not dreamed *of* a van. I only remember one dream from that stormy night, and it was both surreal and deeply moving in equal measure.

In the dream I was living in a previous home and I had a shelf full of found objects from wild places. There were seed pods, mermaid purses and a row of the roundest pebbles imaginable. There were shells the shapes of which were so daedal it was as if they had been sculpted in another world. There were fragile, hollow bones, bleached white over centuries. But the most beautiful object of all, that shelved article which I have not yet shaken out from my mind, months later, was a dead butterfly.

It had been laid atop the wood exactly as it had been found, its wings folded over on themselves, like the painted versions we used to make at school. Do you remember? The teacher would hand you a perfectly symmetrical paper creature and let you place little dots of paint all over one wing only. Next you would fold the other wing over upon the first, gently massaging the liquid paint. And next, the waiting game: would yours be as beautiful as the real-life ones? Never, of course, could this have been the case. The dream butterfly, like the painted, mirror ones from our childhoods, had folded in upon itself but its exquisite markings could still be made out on those fragile wings. It was the most understated shade of brown – full of autumn, with splashes of furry burnt orange, like leaves on top of drying mulch. On the underside of the hind wing, there was a curve of small spots that looked like eyes. Right at the point I saw the eyes, the creature unfolded itself, slowly and with such delicacy, and flew off the shelf, encircling me, leaving me in no doubt whatsoever of its real state of existence. She was a beautiful – and very much living – Large Heath butterfly.

I awoke to the sound of apocalyptic rain battering the van roof, as if the land were in battle. I drove further along the Wild Atlantic Way as the storm threw horizontal sheets of rain down onto the grey, swollen world. In the early evening, when a phone signal could be had, I logged into Instagram to find my feed full of insects of every type – a collective response to a devastating article the *Guardian* had just published about rapid insect decline, full of heart-wrenching, panicking truths. A handful of hours after a dream in which an insect thought dead proved to be alive, I read the news that within a century they could ALL be gone. How are we meant to go on from here? The only thought I had was: *I have no words*. Not in the way that the teenagers around me *‘literally can’t even’* but in the way of: *I am living on my home island, on the soil of my ancestors, and I don’t even have the word for butterfly in my native language*. It began to seep in then. The loss of the ability to name both the landscape and the creatures we share it with in Irish began to sink in. An incomparable loss has been touching the wider world, growing with each news report we hear, during my lifetime. Somehow I had always viewed that loss of wild things as being unrelated to the loss in my homeland, as though they could not really be spoken of in the same breath. But I started to feel an ache, a deep sorrow, when I began to see it all in the clear light of day. How interconnected, how finely woven every single part of it all was. In Ireland, the loss we experienced has had a rippling impact on our sense of self and our place in the world, which has its impact on our ability to speak out, to protect, to name. Our history, our culture, our land, our

identity: we have had so much taken away from us – we were never given any of it back.

For the first time properly in a long time, I felt the loss of things, of precious things – the loss of things I realised I could not even name.

Moths and butterflies hold more than unrivalled beauty on their wings, though; they act as indicators of so much within our world. Almost everything can be looked at more deeply through the study of moths and butterflies: birth, genetics, death and more. The words ‘fragile’ and ‘delicate’ are often used when we talk about these graceful, beauteous insects but when I think of them I am taken by their inherent ability to endure, by the strength that a creature so small must hold within itself in order to traverse such distances across time and place. I hold them in my mind as creatures bathed in resilience, brimming with wonder.

In old Irish folklore, butterflies were the souls of the dead and it was unlucky to harm one. The Red Admiral butterfly, however, was thought to be the devil and was persecuted. The idea of the butterfly as the embodiment of the soul implies their ability to cross into the Otherworld. My ancestors often saw no boundary at all between wild places and that Otherworld which we cannot see.

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After university, I left Ireland at the very first chance I got and moved ‘across the water’ – first to Edinburgh, then Bristol –

desperate to strip away all the layers of trauma that a childhood of devastating violence had left in its wake. I was drawn to the wildest parts of that neighbouring island – highlands and islands, forests and woods, bodies of water of every shape and form. Those parts of the land and water became a form of refuge for me, a way of getting through.

I'm not really sure if it was a conscious thing exactly, this seeking out of special places, like the ones my grandfather spoke of. Out of all my broken-up, aching family, he was the one who offered me constancy and guidance. When he called me on the landline every Sunday evening, the first thing he asked me was if I'd gone anywhere over the weekend. If I'd got outside the flat – outside Dublin, Cork or Edinburgh – what he was really asking was if I'd found somewhere I could feel outside the past. There could be no doubt about it whatsoever: the Sunday evenings when I *had* managed to drag myself out into the natural world – to beaches and rivers, loughs and canals, fields and islands – everything felt different. I don't know if I could honestly say that things felt better but I think that maybe I felt a little more at ease with the sorrow and anxiety that I was struggling to throw off. Slowly, and with very little consciousness of what I was doing, I began to take myself into places where vast but quiet shifts took place in me.

I don't know if such places as Grianan of Aileach, Treshnish on the Isle of Mull, Mwnt cove on the Ceredigion coast or the Cornish Merry Maidens have a name in any other language. I don't know if anyone else refers to these places as being 'skull places', or 'places of shade'. I don't know if my grandfather

ever spoke of them to anyone else; he never did once in my company. I have never, and never will, google the term gifted to me by my grandfather. Some things are best left as they are. In Ireland, these places are often referred to as *áiteanna tanaí*, *caol áit* – thin places.

Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter. They are places that make us feel something larger than ourselves, as though we are held in a place between worlds, beyond experience. After years of visiting such places *away* from Ireland, I heard a voice calling me back, a soft but insistent cry: a call back to my own *áiteanna tanaí*.

A call back to the land that made me, that wounded and broke me, the land that turned out to be the only place that held the power for me to heal. A call back to places that I know my grandfather sought out, and maybe his grandfather before him, too.

Some places are ports in what can be – for many people – a life both unsettled and stormy, spaces in which you can leave that which is familiar, all that you hold to be true, and move closer to all that is unknown. Closer to what some may view as the divine, the otherworldly: that which is rooted in something both constant, yet continuously ebbing and flowing. They are in many ways a form of stopping place, liminal space that feels like it has been set aside for silence and deep, raw solitude. To carve out room within ourselves – unintentionally, even – to imagine what lies beyond the here and the now. Places where the veil is thin allow for pauses in the flow of

what we know – or think we know – of time. A place to imagine what it all might mean, how we have been, how we maybe *could* be – a space to more clearly see a way through.

The lives each of us has lived is ours alone. Our trauma and suffering, our joys and hopes are ours alone, no matter who we may have shared them with. The things that we need to help us get by are, of course, just as individual. There are as many ways to try to heal a wound as there are paths through a housing estate, forest, coastline or corridor. For some of us, place is one of those lines in the tarmac – a clearing in the brambles, a lighthouse, safe harbour. Places that anchor, nurture and hold us do not have to be beautiful, cut-off, or even what might be described as wild. I'm not just talking about forests, mountains and wild coves. I am also thinking about supermarket car parks with even just one tree, the back of housing estates where life has been left to exist, dump-piles in burnt-out factories where insects glisten, dirty streams at the edges of things – full of waste but still brimming with something like renewal. Places can be abandoned, dangerous, rugged or broken – haunted by the ghosts of dark memories – but still they might help us find a way through, a sense of safety – even just for a little while. There is so much life in the places around us and, sometimes, for some of us, somehow, this helps us to value our own life. Maybe even at times when the act of staying alive is a daily struggle.

Battles, governments, laws, leaders – borders – come and go, but the land and its sacred places remain unmoved and unchanged in their core. There are some places in this broken,

burning and bleeding world in which I have experienced moments – fleeting but clear as winter light – where I feel hope like the beat of moth-wings on my skin. There are still places on this earth that sing of all that came and left, of all that is still here and of all that is yet to come. Places that have been touched, warmed, by the presence of something. By its heat, by its breath, by the beat of its heart. Places that hold on their surface a shadow-trace left behind by something we can still sense but no longer see.