Mountains of the Hag

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There is nowhere for me to begin but in the west. On the harsh stirring Burren, where ancient dolmens stand like portals to the sky and orchids scent the air. On Slieve Echtghe's lonely green slopes and the gray cliffed bays of the Clare coast. In the haunted woods of Coole and the bramble-crowned boreens around Kilmacduagh. For me, Ireland begins with the bouldery borderland around the little market town of Gort, for it was there that I first came to know Ireland and the feminine soul of her land.

" Gort? However did you get to *Gort*?" my Irish friends ask, knotting their brows when they learn of my connection to the undistinguished town on the Burren's edge. " Turned left at Loughrea," I shrug. It always gets a laugh and is as good an answer as any. Why Gort? Few young American women stayed alone in the west of Ireland a quarter-century ago, and among them, Gort was hardly a popular destination. Doolin was, for the music; Connemara for its lonely vastness; Galway City for its rowdy Salthill pubs. But Gort is not especially picturesque; it boasts neither scenery nor nightlife. In British comedian Tony Hawks's phrase, Gort looks just like it sounds. Gort is to Galway what Podunk is to Idaho.

However *did* I get to Gort? Not through the dartboard method I suggest to other Americans, although my journey did have something of that random quality. When asked for a list of Ireland's must-see sights, I suggest getting a map of the country and a dart, perhaps one borrowed from an American bar popular with the Irish. Pin the map to the wall, I say, step back ten paces, and throw the dart at the map. Then pack your bags and head for whatever village the dart pierces. Find a bed-and-breakfast and tuck in for the duration. Befriend any willing locals, ramble the countryside, frequent the pubs, eavesdrop on the gossip. You will learn more about Ireland that way, I assure the aspiring tourist, than with any it-it's-Tuesday-it-must-be-Clifden package. For Ireland is not a single place but a mosaic of innumerable pieces, each fascinating in its own way, not one identical to another.

Today Gort remains my special piece of Ireland's mosaic, decades after I first came over. There are places in Ireland I love more, but none where I feel more at home. Not only in the town itself, but also in the lands around it and in the villages strewn across its baronies: in Kinvara, to whose deep harbor the tall-masted Galway hookers return each August; Ballinderreen, scarcely a crossroads but with your choice of two pubs; Kilnaboy of the famous bawdy goddess; Feakle, high in the mountains of the hag; Liscannor where a spiral pattern is still walked around the holy well; Roo, no longer even on the map but once the region's richest village; Ballyvaughan, on the Burren's ocean edge, and Carran deep in its rocky recesses. Each of these names evokes memories of days spent rambling the country-side, evenings spent in the company of friends, countless hours spent learning the lore of the land.

However *did* I get to Gort? I came that first summer, decades ago, challenged by the man who called himself my Eskimo grandfather to find my home place, the Mayo town from which my grand-parents hailed. South Galway is not east Mayo—nowhere near—but I was an Alaskan girl, and space in Alaska is measured in hours rather than miles. When I touched down at Shannon ready to see my grandparents' village, I had already written ahead to the cousins. Having met scores of Americans in Ireland trying to trace their roots with only sur-names and perhaps a county to go on (" My grand-father was a Flaherty, from—Galway I think?"), I recognize my luck in having addresses, even de-scriptions, of my relations before ever I set foot on Irish soil. The Gordons kept in touch, despite the sixty-five years between Pop's emigration and his first trip back. Just after his eightieth birthday, a decade before my own first expedition there, Pop returned to Bohola to renew family bonds and, while he was about it, to blow on the coals of a few family feuds. My Irish grandfather thus opened the door for the trip my Eskimo grandfather inspired.

Pop never stopped being Irish. When he died, more than eighty years away from Mayo, he still spoke with an unmistakable brogue. In New York, where we lived during my early childhood, Pop instructed us to say " Irish-American" when asked our nationality. We learned countless Irish songs—mostly drinking, some rebel—that we sang as we jolted up the then-unpaved Alcan highway to our

new home. No Irish community welcomed us in Alaska, but I never lost my sense of myself as a hyphenated American. When I studied literature in graduate school, it seemed natural to gravitate towards Irish writers. Indeed, I remember over-fervently pointing out to one professor that everyone on his Major British Writers seminar syllabus—Edmund Spenser, Jonathan Swift, George Bernard Shaw, William Butler Yeats, Gerard Manley Hopkins, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett—was either Irish or had lived in Ireland. Intellectually insecure and thus easily offended, the man repaid my jingoism by persecuting me that entire semester. But I did not back down, as the title of my paper on " British comic poetry" shows: " When the Irish Smile," it taunted, " They Bare Their Teeth."

Thus, as I examined tourist brochures and studied maps for what I was already calling " my first trip to Ireland," I discovered a goal beyond meeting the family Pop had left at the century's turning. I wanted to see the places of which I had read, places so precisely limned by Ireland's writers that, like the image of Point Hope behind Howard's closed eyelids, I could almost see them. At first I thought of doing a complete literary tour, but I soon realized that lifetimes of peregrinations would not suffice. Every region, every county, almost every village has a writer or two connected with it. Clare has Brian Merriman; Galway, Anthony Raftery; dear old dirty Dublin has Joyce and Gogarty and O'Casey. There is no place in Ireland that a writer had not cherished or hated—sometimes both at once.

I decided to specialize. Although I admired many Irish writers, there was only one I loved without reservation. For years, I had read Yeats's poetry from the tattered brown volume given me by my favorite professor. So I decided to visit the places Yeats had made familiar: the demesne of Coole with its beautiful, mysterious wild swans; Kiltartan Cross, home of the Irish airman who foresaw his death somewhere among the clouds above; the stately home of Lissadell with its great windows opening to the south. Ben Bulben and Glen-Car, Dooney rock and Raftery's cellar, lonely Echthge of streams, the Seven Woods, the lake isle of Innis-free. I began to annotate my map with the places of which Yeats sang.

It did not take me long to discover that my grandparents' Mayo village lay conveniently between the two places that figure prominently in Yeats's work. Galway is the next county to Mayo, which in turn borders Sligo; little over a hundred miles separates the furthest points. As my itinerary became clear, I noticed a town near two vital sites. Gort is adjacent both to Yeats's tower home at Ballylee and to Coole Park, demesne of Lady Augusta Gregory, founder of the Abbey Theater and Yeats's artistic patron (perhaps more accurately, matron). Gort it would be! I would find lodgings in that little Galway town from which I would take day-trips to Mayo and Sligo.

I shake my head now at my ignorance. Distance in Ireland is not like distance in America. When friends are making their first trip over, I like to offer them an unfolded sheet of paper. " Now this is America," I tell them. Then I wad the paper up into a tight little ball. " Now this is Ireland: same size, only smaller." A hundred miles in Connacht is a long, long way, much longer than in Indiana. Gort is nowhere near Bohola. You have to go through Ardrahan and Kilcolgan and Clarinbridge, then through that interminable series of roundabouts near Oranmore, up past Claregalway and Claremorris and Tuam, through the pilgrim congestion of Knock, then turn left at Kiltimaugh—Oh, you could be up and back in a day if you had a car, but whyever would you?

Whyever indeed. Besides, that first trip over, I did not have a car; I had a Rambler bus/rail pass. And service was neither fast nor direct between my destinations. After finding a cheap, no-mod-cons room above a pub on Gort's main street, I jumped the bus to Galway City and asked for the next connection to Bohola. The attendant shook his head, " Ah, but you don't want to go to Bohola." Yes, in fact I did. " No," he assured me smoothly, " you do not. It's hard to get to, and there's nothing there." He returned to his paperwork without offering further assistance. I took the printed schedules back to Gort and puzzled it out for myself.

I did get to Mayo, and then beyond to Sligo, but only once, and that was toward the end of my stay. The rest of the time, I hung around Gort. Tom Hannon from Roo, Gort's antiquarian, eventually theorized that blood instinct compelled me to remain near the ancient center of the Ó Daillaighs, my paternal grandmother Daley's clan. Proof was near to hand: had not the Ó Daillaighs held their annual gathering over on the Flaggy Shore in the very month I first appeared on the local scene? The fact that I had no prior knowledge of the " Burren Bards" was inconsequential. Blood will out.

Not only had I never heard of the Ó Daillaighs, I knew virtually nothing about the Daleys, not even their county of origin. “ The Daleys have *always* been from New Jersey,” my grand-mother Elizabeth proclaimed as her daughter Reggie researched our family history. “ Oh, right,” snapped my aunt. “ Of course. We’re Indian. Daley is a famous Native American name.” Elizabeth stuck to her story, more from ignorance than intransigence. Her family kept silent about life before America, a strategy common to those who wished to extinguish memories of poverty and pain. Undeterred by the drying up of my family stream in New Jersey, Tom rooted through an astonishing assemblage of photo-copies, newspaper clippings, and notes written in his spidery hand to find material on the Ó Daillaigh bards.

Thus I came to learn about my alleged ancestors. There was Cearbhaill, who stole away the beautiful Eibhlin á Ruin from another man, posing as a harper at their wedding and proclaiming his love in a tender song over which Handel sighed in envy. And Angus the satirist, who stirred up con-stant trouble among the West Clare overlords with his biting quatrains. There was Donnchadh Mór, who inspired Dante; Gofraidh Fionn the fair-haired, the passionate religious poet; Angus MacDara, who wrote Ireland’s most rousing war chant. And my favorite, the wild Muireadhac, the “ irritable genius”: insulted by an ill-dressed tax collector at Lissadell—*lios Ó Daillaigh*, the fort of the Daleys—he brained the scoundrel, was forced to flee to Scotland, and ended up famous for his poetry on both sides of the Irish Sea.

I am happy to claim these hotheads and romantics as my forebears—I’m a bit of a romantic hothead myself—although I remain unconvinced that it was ancestral blood that kept me in Gort. Nevertheless I stayed. Weeks passed without my catching that bus to Mayo and Sligo. Mornings I wrote Yeats-haunted ballads, afternoons I rambled the countryside. And evenings I drank in local lore along with my pints at Máire’s pub, where I found an odd friendly home with my publican landlady and her somewhat ragtag assortment of patrons. The back door of the long dim pub opened right into the kitchen, so that family and business life melded together seamlessly. The black-and-white twins, Sharon and Gráinne—the first dark and intense, the other a sunny redhead—served pints beside their sturdy mother, who knew all gossip worth sharing and had an Ó Daillaigh-like disdain for attempted overregulation of struggling publicans.

I think in retrospect that it was neither the poetry of Yeats nor that of the Burren bards that kept me stalled in Gort. Nor was it the boisterous afterhours action at Máire’s, where I witnessed plenty of singsongs and occasional fights and even, one time, a hedgehog set loose by Freddy the Frenchman. No, Gort held me because of the glimpse it afforded into the importance of place in Ireland. I don’t mean place in the abstract, but place in the exhaustingly specific. Every night in the pub, I was quiz-zed on where I had spent the day. Then the story-telling would begin, providing narrative context for what I had seen on my rambles. Some-times I learned of recent events, as when Ardrahan was defined as where Michael Slattery’s sheep—hoisting themselves through a narrow gap in the stone wall of borrowed pasturage—had escaped to ravage whole fields of cabbages. More often, reference was to an older tale, as when my visit to Ballylee’s disappearing river brought to mind blind Raftery’s love for fair Mary Hynes two centuries earlier, or when my exploration of Kilmacduagh recalled ancient King Guaire’s dinner disappearing skyward when he prayerfully offered to share it. Thus was I taught—gradually, merrily—how inseparable are place and story in Ireland.

Had I used the dartboard method to plan my trip, would anything have been different? Had my dart pierced Garryowen or Glengariff, had I gone there and boarded above a pub for a few months, would I have discovered a similarly dense aggregate of history and gossip, poetry and mystery? Without question. That I found it in Gort is not surprising, for that is where I was looking. Yet Garryowen or Glengariff might not have called me back time and again, as Gort has. For just as place and story are inseparable in Ireland, neither can be separated from the goddess, for she is the full mosaic of which these places are the distinct, individual pieces.

This multiplicity of goddesses can be traced to the earliest written records. The *Book of Invasions* tells us that not one but three ruling goddesses greeted the Celts as they stepped onto Ireland’s shore. To Fódla, Banba, and Ériu—each in turn—the Celts promised that, if she did not hinder their settle-ment, they would name the island after her. Although invaders are typically cavalier about such promises, the Celts faced an uncomfortable future if they betrayed the majority of their welcoming

committee. Which of these intimidatingly powerful goddesses would they disappoint, and what excuse could they give? To cover the Celtic rear, it was decided that because Ériu's pledge had been spoken by the bard Amairgin and because the words of a poet can never be reversed, the land would be called Éire. That decision remains in force, but queenship of the country is held just as firmly by Ériu's whispered sisters and by scores of other goddesses, fairy queens, heroines and other figures of feminine power who evoke and express the qualities of Ireland's varied landscapes. And among that numinous assembly one stands out, one to whom I have felt compelled to return again and again: the goddess of the stark Burren hills and the slopes of watery Echthge.

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I did not know her when I first arrived. Settling into my dim third-floor room above the pub, I fancied myself conversant with, even fluent in, Ireland's goddess heritage. Had I not studied Celtic mythology, the better to understand my favorite poets? I had read of brilliant Brigit and wild Medb and strong-willed Síonann, figures recent enough that their myths and symbols, feasts and rituals, had been duly recorded. But even the most voracious reading could not have prepared me for the goddess I would encounter, one of such immense antiquity that her rites and liturgies were never written down, at least not in script we can read today. To encounter that soulful goddess—she who stares out to sea from the western Cliffs and who shadows the land from mountain heights in the east—I had to travel to her land, because more than any other Irish goddess, she *is* that land.

She is the Cailleach, the old one, the hag, the witch, the rock-faced crone, the giantess of vast years and even vaster power. In the Irish Triads, she stands as a synonym for antiquity: " Three great ages: age of the yew, age of the eagle, age of the Cailleach." Elder sister of Irish goddesses—Yeats called her " the Mother of the Gods herself"—the hag flourished so long ago that we know nothing of her people: not their date of arrival in Ireland, not their race, continent of origin, language, or religion. We do not know how long their culture existed or why it ended. Did epidemic or starvation lay waste the hag's tribe? Were they crowded off the land by later arrivals? Did conquerors exterminate or assimilate them? All we know for certain is that new goddesses, brought by new settlers, so thoroughly supplanted the Old One that there are no holy places in Ireland where her rituals are still kept.

And yet she survives. That she does so is testimony to a remarkable feature of Irish culture: the tenacity with which people cling to topographical names. What's in a place-name? A great deal, I learned that first summer as I drifted about a countryside awash in names. Most were in Irish—as I quickly learned to call the language of my grandparents rather than "Gaelic," Welsh for " untamed" and a word rather like that Attic coinage for people who barked (" *bar-bar*") their own languages rather than speaking civilized Greek. From the moment I disembarked in Gort, I felt engulfed by names. My map labeled counties, towns, cities, rivers, mountains, islands, and peninsulas, but the torrent did not stop there, for Ireland also has provinces, baronies, townlands, parishes, quarters, and demesnes. The mob at Máire's knew even more: names of crossroads, wells, boulders, big old trees, waterfalls, river bends, gaps in mountain ranges, sections of forest. Names defined physical characteristics, provided historical context, evoked myth and poetry. Every slight rise, every indistinct section of bog, had its own name—sometimes more than one. Swimming in that sea of names, I learned that their function was not to provide me navigational assistance but to anchor the present to the past. Beneath the surface of today's Ireland, all earlier Irelands remain, as tantalizingly close as the submerged fairy cities that float beneath the waves of the Burren's lakes.

Amid this flood of place-names, those that evoke goddesses are consistent in one regard. Archaeologist Helen Lanigan Wood has established that while a hillfort (*rath*), church (*kil*), or other human site is rarely named after a goddess, natural features—like a mountain (*slieve* or *knock*) or lake (*lough*)—invariably are. The more prominent a natural feature, the more ancient its name. Worship of the Cailleach may thus date to those primordial Irish who, some six thousand years ago, entered a nameless land. They were not Celts; the word *Cailleach* derives from a lost non-Celtic tongue, most likely that of her original worshipers. The tribe of the hag named whatever caught their eyes, leaving the leftovers to later settlers. Layer upon layer, like sedimentary limestone, names accumulated on the Irish landscape. The Cailleach is bedrock, or near enough, her name on the highest mountains evidence of her great antiquity.

Sometime in the dim past, those who worshiped the hag saw her in the land—saw the land *as* their goddess—and cemented that connection through place-names. Although uncounted years have passed since the hag's religion died away, she lives on in the region around Gort. We see her silhouette on Ceann na Cailleach, " Hag's Head," the most southerly of the Cliffs of Moher. Her personal name, Mal, appears in a nearby town, Miltown Malby. The hag's body forms Slieve Echtghe, the " mountains of the awful one." She stands tall upon the stony heights of Slievecallan and Knocky-callanan, both of which mean " hag mountain"; she rests in the gentle valley of Glennagalliach, " hag's glen." The unyielding Irish conservatism regarding place-names has kept alive an un-imaginably ancient harvest goddess whose aged appearance belies her enormous vigor and prodig-ious sexual vitality. Like the Burren that hides orchids in its gray stone crevices, the Cailleach hides the power of youth within her great age.

But how, knowing nothing of her people or their rituals, can we describe the hag's character with such assurance? Because wherever we find the Cailleach's name, we also find folktales about her, " fragmentary recollections ... degenerated from myth," as John Kelleher calls them. Place-names pro-voke storytelling, as the mob at Máire's taught me, and what is true today was doubtless true in the past. Imagine this scene: walking the trail above the Cliffs, a mother points out the hag's face to her child. " Who *is* she?" the child wants to know. The mother spins a yarn about the Cailleach, one she learned from her mother. Delighted, the child begs for more. And so another story is unwound, then another. When might such a scene have occurred? A hundred years ago? A thousand? Five thousand?

I myself saw the Cailleach at that very spot, when Tom Hannon took me on a winter solstice ex-pedition in search of the hag. It had been a decade since Tom and I had first raised pints, that first time over when I discovered in him a teacher of the old ways. On a return visit when I convinced Tom to show me some of his favorite sites around the Burren, he told me he would come to Máire's—still my home-from-home in Gort—promptly at sunrise.

The sun rises late on Irish December mornings; it was half-nine before the light was strong enough to draw us from Máire's warm kitchen. A slow drive in icy rain under a low slate sky brought us to the ocean's edge. There, dwarfed by a timeless treeless landscape, we gazed down nearly a thousand feet to foam-flecked black waves. Shouting the Cailleach's name above the roar of storm and sea, Tom pointed out her face on the farthest of the Cliffs of Moher, tracing it with lifted arm. As he did, I felt the shadow of ages upon us, as tangible as the cold rain on our cheeks. How many others, over how many centuries, had made that same gesture, invoked that same ancient name?

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The cluster of places incorporating the Cailleach's name is less obvious a monument than Brigit's gray stone statue on the Kildare square or Medb's massive tumulus that gathers clouds above Sligo town. But she exists in another way, too, for Ireland's regional goddesses call forth human avatars, historical women whose biographies become assimilated into their own myths like streams joining a great river. Brigit's healing wisdom was made manifest in the great abbess who bore her name; Medb reincarnated herself in fiery-haired Maud Gonne and her friend, the revolutionary warrior Constance Markiewicz; the Cailleach wore many guises, as many as the countless old women who embodied her wisdom.

These hags are nameless, their memory barely traceable in folklore. As we learn from Sean O'Sullivan's 1930s handbook for apprentice folklorists, mention of old women provoked the follow-ing standard questions, revealingly full of associations: " Are the hags regarded as being very old and wise and possessed of supernatural powers? Were they looked upon as supernatural beings? Had they unusually great wisdom? Could they cause sudden storms and sickness?" Countless anonymous crones merged with the Cailleach, renewing her ancient legend even as they became submerged in the archetypal sea.

But one haggish woman from the Gort area retained an undiluted individuality: Biddy Early, the white witch of Clare. I learned of her that first year, when I used Yeats's poetry as a gazetteer for my rambles. Biddy Early appears in the section of " The Shadowy Waters," wherein Yeats describes the famous Seven Woods of Coole. Reciting the poem to myself, I paced the paths, learning to distinguish

Shan-walla from Kyle-dortha, sunny Kyle-na-no from dim Páirc-na-carraig, Páirc-na-lee from magical Páirc-na-tarav. My favorite was the curiously named Inchy wood, of which Yeats wrote:

> Dim Inchy wood, that hides badger and fox
> and marten-cat, and borders that old wood
> Wise Biddy Early called the wicked wood.

Yeats's words are so smoothly beautiful that it is easy to miss an odd inexactitude, one that becomes more baffling the more intimately you know the Seven Woods. What was this place called the wicked wood? I tramped around Coole looking for it, only to realize that Inchy borders several of the other woodlands. Was one of them the wicked wood? If so, which? Or was there an eighth woodland, unnamed by the poet? Was it within or outside Coole's boundaries? And whatever did the name mean? My wanderings provided no answer. I scoured Yeats's *Celtic Twilight* and Lady Gregory's folklore collection to no avail; neither mentioned the wicked wood.

The poem pointed to " wise Biddy Early" as the source of the phrase. Born Bridget O'Connor on the slopes of Slieve Echtghe late in the eighteenth century, Biddy moved down to Feakle, married, bore a child, and lived there until she died. She might have passed an ordinary anonymous life save for the fact that, sometime in her youth, Biddy showed a special courtesy to the fairy people. For that kindness, they offered her a little gift. It did not look like much—just a blue glass bottle—but the fairy object endowed its owner with gifts of farsight and prophecy.

No one knows exactly what Biddy saw when she peered into the blue bottle. Some believed clouds formed miniature pictures; others claimed a tiny man pantomimed answers; Burren folklorist Thomas Westropp was told the bottle contained a single soaked shamrock that performed interpretive dance. However Biddy gained her answers, they were stunningly accurate. Soon she was the region's most famous personage, a combination of doctor, criminologist, prophet, and therapist who could diagnose illnesses, uncover dishonesty, foretell love's likelihood—and tell you how to relieve your woes as well. Those seeking Biddy's aid clogged the hilly roads to Feakle, traveling by foot or cart or horse-back from as far away as Connemara. They threw down bedrolls on the stony ground or rented a neighbor's cot for a few pence. There was no cost for the healing itself; the fairies had forbidden Biddy to charge for services. So grateful clients brought gifts, often in bottles and jugs. The avail-ability of free poteen made Biddy Early's cottage a popular destination even for those with no urgent need for healing.

Other than running an unlicensed pub—I like to imagine a nineteenth-century version of Máire's, complete with tale spinning and singsongs far into the night—Biddy seems to have led a morally unobjectionable life. Nonetheless her magical powers attracted rumor and innuendo. Where, insinuated a certain faction, did that blue bottle originate? With the fairy folk, or somewhere darker? This faction consisted mainly of the local clergy, who saw Biddy as a competitor for souls and wallets. Biddy responded by calling down curses on them—minor ones, like snaring their horses in mud with rider still attached, but curses nonetheless. Otherwise she worked hard, healing colicky babes and prolapsed ewes, rooting out scoundrels, warning against one enterprise and encouraging another. Her personal life was similarly full. She had four or five husbands, the last a man who came for healing and never left. She agreed to treat him in return for a wedding; the fairies apparently did not disallow this particular fee-for-service arrangement. Oh, yes, and another thing: her last groom was Biddy's junior by sixty years.

Twenty years after Biddy Early's death, Lady Gregory predicted she would soon become entirely a figure of legend. But Gregory's own work, together with that of Yeats and Westropp, forestalled that; today no one doubts Biddy's historicity despite the tendency of wild tales to attach themselves to her name. In handwritten folkloric documents at the Ennis library, you learn little of Biddy's everyday routine but many versions of where Biddy got the blue bottle, what she did with it, and where it was hidden after she died. Such posthumous fame would have unsettled Biddy, who tended to grow angry at invasions of her privacy. One telling incident, recorded from the Bradford farmer Mr. Minogue, describes a man who named his horse Biddy Early. When Biddy courteously requested that he find another name, the man just as courteously agreed. The next time she met the pair, the witch learned the horse's new name—Biddy. She looked deeply into her blue bottle, and the horse fell over dead. (My apologies, Missus, if I have myself given offense by speaking of you!)

Despite Biddy's discomfort with publicity, she receives more rather than less as time goes by. A brewpub in Inagh is named after her, and new books trumpet her reputation. There was even a foiled attempt at creating a commercial Biddy Early center. I say foiled, rather than failed, because if you credit local gossip, the White Witch herself prevented the project. " Above in Feakle" as they say in Gort, Biddy's cottage still stands, a roofless ruin. In the 1990s, dollar-and-punt-hungry developers began restoration work with the aim of opening a witch-kitsch shop. Disaster struck: workers were injured, relatives died, and funds evaporated. The project was abandoned. If Biddy did not herself wreak the havoc, I have been assured, she had a hand in it. " She was a good woman in her day, she only wanted to be left in peace, shouldn't she be given her rights?" offered a friend from Crusheen.

Oh, yes, what about the wicked wood? That mysterious passage in Yeats led me to Biddy Early, but there the trickle of information disappeared like water down Raftery's cellar. Either Biddy kept secret the location of the wicked wood, or no one had ever recorded it. No matter: I had discovered my first avatar of the Cailleach and had experienced for the first time the power of the archetypal hag. And those rambles around Coole seeded in me a deep connection to the countryside. It is easier to explain why I return to Gort than why I first went there. I may have arrived by serendipity, but I go back by choice, drawn by the magic of the Cailleach and by the beauty of her land.

I have seen it in every season, from gray summer to green winter. Time changes the hag's cliff-face only imperceptibly, but my human friends manifest its passage clearly. Tom Hannon, in the prime of life when first we met, is now stiff with age. Angela Coen, the weaver whose Galway shawl I wear, was taken by cancer in midlife and lies beneath the stones of Kilmacduagh. Dark Sharon, one of Maire's twins, was killed one morning when a lorry driver lost control on a Clare roundabout. Like Burren orchids, human lives bloom and fade. If I live long enough to wear the hag's face, I must endure more such losses. As my life's journey brings me closer to the Cailleach, she whispers to me ever more urgently. And so, hoping to understand her secrets, I journey again and again to her land.

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Its eastern and northern boundaries are formed by the mountains where Biddy Early lived. Slieve Echtghe or Aughty, named for an obscure goddess called the " awful one," makes a great arc from Ardrahan down to Lough Derg, through the parish once called Tuam Aughty, now known as Feakle. Within that mountainous half-moon nestles silver Lough Graney, named for the Cailleach's sunny younger self. Westward lies the country's heart, in the gray stony Burren that poet Emily Lawless called the " soul of fierce Clare, wild west of all our west" and memoirist Nuala O'Faolain, " landscape of stone and wide blue air." It is in the Burren that we find the greatest concentration of sites named for the hag, the most legends about her, and a land carved in the stark features of her image.

Extending over several hundred square miles of northwest Clare, the Burren can be oddly invisible. There is no " welcome to the Burren" sign, no fence or gatehouse to mark its boundaries; indeed, there is some contention about precisely where the Burren starts and ends. Its distinctive fissured limestone terraces reach the sea near Kinvara, home of the king after whom Gort is named: *Gort inse Guaire*, the fields of Guaire. Follow the coast road to friendly Ballyvaughan, skirt the Flaggy Shore where my Ó Daillaigh ancestors hosted their poetic assemblies, then turn south towards music-filled Doolin, and you will be in the Burren the whole way. Embracing the villages of Kilnaboy and Kilfenora, Corofin and Carran, and the famous spa town of Lisdoonvarna, the area's gentle green valleys and stark rock mountains provide rich fodder for arguments about what exactly is Burren, what not.

Between the Burren and Slieve Echtghe rolls open farmland into which occasional stony fingers stretch. But even where the rock seems to peter out, the Burren is invisibly present, for beneath the fields around Gort lies an intricate karst landscape of deep caves and tunnels. Rivers disappear into great rock cellars, only to reappear a few miles closer to the sea; winter lakes called turloughs fill and empty with the changing seasons. Coole Lake itself is part a series of turloughs that, in the rainy 1990s, flooded to such an historic extreme that you could sail from Inchy Wood straight out into the Atlantic. Water—ocean and stream, lake and river—reveals the shape of the hag's landscape but it is rock, above and below ground, that defines it.

I have often shaken my head at the irony that I first came to the Burren because of an Eskimo named Rock. The very name of the land—from the Irish *Bhoireann*—means " rock" or " rockplace." Rock is the hag's prime element, her stony spine. This not a mere figure of speech, for Burren rock is not igneous—ejected from the earth's core during some ancient cataclysm—but carboniferous, created from the skeletons of once-living beings. Four million years ago, a shallow sea covered what is now the Burren. Over immeasurable eons, billions of sea creatures died, their bodies drifting down to the ocean's bed. Sand and mud buried their remains, and the water's enormous weight pressed the combination into limestone.

Layer upon layer, like names on the Irish landscape, the Burren composed itself beneath that great ancient ocean. A million years passed, then another million, before the sea retreated. Rain sculpted the newly lifted land, slipping through porous stone to carve out caverns and tunnels, gullies and grykes. Glaciers sandpapered the land, then melted north-ward, leaving fertile till in which great trees rooted themselves. Bears claimed residence in the Burren's caves, and giant deer roamed its climax forest of pine and yew. Thousands of millennia passed before the first humans camped on the ocean shores. Soon after, the sound of the ax rang through the hag's country. One tree at a time, one acre at a time, the great dark forests were laid waste. With the trees gone, the wind took charge, sweeping topsoil from the Burren's hills to expose the primeval seabed. Limestone pavements and glacier-sown wild-flowers are ancient features of the land, but its barrenness is comparatively new, only a few millennia old.

The hag is an appropriate goddess for such a landscape for, like the Cailleach, the Burren is hard to appreciate from a distance. Today we understand a land's beauty predominantly through our visual sense, but except for the Cliffs of Moher, the Burren is severely unphotogenic. As Kinvara artist Ann Korff has pointed out, our definition of scenery, unduly inflamed by eighteenth-century landscape painting, demands sublime vistas like the Ring of Kerry or the Bens of Connemara. But the Burren is the antithesis of the picturesque. I have taken hundreds of photographs of the Burren, not one of which captures its monochrome vastness, rock pavements stretching toward rock mountains up which climb rock walls. A close-up of a single orchid nestled in a gryke, one of those long fissures that vee into the limestone, can hint at the Burren's stern drama and secret delicacy. But anything larger fails. Gazing into my viewfinder, I convince myself that this shot will, finally, catch the Burren's grandeur. When the film comes back, I find just another blur of indistinct grayness.

Photographs record an instant, but the Burren is a landscape of epochs. As such, it takes time to appreciate, time most visitors do not allow. Hordes are disgorged daily at dolmens; they mill about for a bit; then they're off to Galway city, muttering about " having come all this way to see a bunch of rocks." Such visitors might agree with Cromwell's general who called the Burren " a savage land, yielding neither water enough to drown a man, nor tree to hang him, nor soil enough to bury him." Savage? Any old woman can seem that way to those too rushed to appreciate her. The Burren does not startle you with its beauty. But beauty is there—orchids in stone—and because of, not despite, the limestone wrinkles.

Regardless of its visual severity, or perhaps because of it, the Burren is Ireland's most sensuous landscape. Touch, smell, hearing are teased to attention by wind and weather, rock and flowers. In summer the rains fall softly warm, in winter sharply chill; breezes stroke me sweetly or press against me, hard and strong; ocean waves lick at my feet, and tiny holy wells sprinkle my hands. And I can never, not for an instant, forget—even when I do not lay hands upon it—the hard tactility of the rock. Yeats called it " cold Clare rock," but when I touch it, it is always warmer than I expect, for the Burren holds heat like an enormous solar battery. Pocked and striated and tattooed, the Burren is like the body of a great barnacled whale, inscribed with ocean hieroglyphs we read not with eyes but with fingers.

Scent, too, awakens. Burren grass pierces the air with greenness. Rooted in the nourishing warmth of limestone, the far-from-barren Burren provides Ireland's richest pasturage. " The rugged rocks abound / but gray and green / the grass between / as grows on Irish ground," goes the song I have heard so many times in Doolin's pubs. The fourteenth-century *Caithreim Thoirdhealbhaign* described the Burren as a " hilly gray expanse of jagged peaks and slippery steeps, a country nevertheless flowing with milk and yielding luscious grass." *Petra Fertilis*, the " fertile rock," the monks of Corcomroe called their cherished contradictory Burren. Between that ruined abbey and the village of

Carron stands Ireland's only wild-flower perfumery, where the improbably lush Burren blooms are distilled into mythically named scents. In stone fissures and pockets, Mediterranean flowers—orchids and maidenhair fern—flourish beside arctic plants I recognize from girlhood, mountain avens and siberian primrose whose first seeds were sown in the Ice Age. On a spring day, Burren air intoxicates with mingled scents.

And ah, the Burren's sounds. Westropp called it a place of " undescribed sounds ... the noise of the wind in the rocks and bushes, the strange prattle of streams in crannies deep down in the rocks." My Ó Daillaigh forebears employed the poetic device they called the " catalog of beloved sounds" to evoke their homeland. I, too, have recorded in my heart a Burren symphony. Its winds are never silent: sighing in the foyer of Liscannor's holy well, shrieking like a banshee across Hag's Head, groaning in the branches of Coole's ancient rock-breaking yews. The ocean drums on the stony coast; rain tambourines the limestone pavements. Uncountable brassy birds cry out, puffins on the Cliffs and ducks on Coole Lake and peacocks at a little farm near Lough Cutra. And—most beloved of all—the voices of my friends swell in a chorus: Brendan reciting Yeats above Coole Lake, Anna murmur-ing over tea, Máire clucking comfortingly, Jessie crooning silly songs to her dogs, Tom spinning tales endlessly and effortlessly.

Not only are the senses enlivened by the stark Burren beauty, but the spirit is stirred as well. As we attend to subtle shifts in wind and weather, as we follow the slow movement of clouds over sea, as we watch the setting sun delicately bronze the gray rock, we fall into a trance of reflection. Early Christian monks were drawn to the Burren, and with good reason, for no landscape among Ireland's *dyserts*, its deserts of the soul, more fully invites us to ponder temporality. Its flowers form a natural clock; the blooming of the first gentians is met with the tender Irish prayer, *go mbheirimidh beo ar an taim seo arís*, " May we be alive at this time next year." Time is the song of the Burren. Primeval oceans echo inaudibly in its sediment; ancient glacial rivers resound silently in its ravines. Humanity's remains—dolmens on stone pavements, cairns on hilltops, ruined abbeys in cradling valleys—seem mute by comparison. The tempo of the Burren is not human but geologic. Eon by eon, century by century, tide by tide, the Burren composes and recomposes itself.

The Burren turns all but the most adamantly shallow toward profundity; temporal reflections lead naturally to graver thoughts. Thus it seems at first glance appropriate that the land's matron, its harvest queen, is dubbed a goddess of death. The logic seems impeccable: the Cailleach is old, there-fore she will soon die. But this facile interpretation bears closer scrutiny, for what has age to do with death? People—like birds and bears, harebells and hazels—die when they die. The Cailleach's wor-shipers saw infants fail in their first hour, young women felled by childbirth and young men by war, strong elders stricken with sudden fatal illnesses. The same is true today, however much we may delude ourselves that only the aged stand at death's door. When an elderly person passes, grief is rarely contaminated by outrage. But when a girl is "taken before her time," when a middle-aged man does not " live out his allotted years," the bereaved cast about for something to blame, somewhere to vent their fury at this break in the " natural order of things." But what is natural about death is its in-evitability, not its timing. Who would have predicted that Tom Hannon, waving an already-arthritic arm for a pint, would outlive by so many decades young Sharon who filled his glass?

Rather than a grim reminder of the reaper, the Old One is a symbol of survival—merry and spry, strong and hard, enduring as rock. The most provocative image of this victorious Cailleach is found right at the heart of the Burren, in a village near Hag's Head where an ancient Christian convent suc-ceeded an even-more-ancient pagan sanctuary. The abbess there, according to local legend, was Inghean Bhaoith; her church was called Kil-Inghean-Bhaoith, later corrupted into Kilnaboy—a name that, although the convent has long since vanished, still applies to the town. The once populous religious center is now sparsely tenanted. Only the occasional local auto wends along the cow-crowded roads. Even more rarely, a vehicle bearing the name of another county than " An Clár" or " Gaillimh"—Clare or Galway—pulls into the wee car park near the crossroads. Outsiders in Kilnaboy? Rest assured they come in search of the region's most famous hag.

She is easy to find. On a little steep hill beside the road, a roofless stone church stands open to rain and wind. A latch secures a black metal gate in the churchyard wall; beyond, new-mounded graves crowd against sunken older ones. Walk around the ruin to the right, then turn and gaze upwards, perhaps twenty feet over your head, to a space above the arched doorway. Give your eyes a moment

to adjust to stone grayness, then you will see her. Worn by wind and time, the granite relief is still bold enough to reveal a woman who, you cannot help but notice, is stark naked. Her posture is just as bold: she does a bawdy dance, holding open her legs to display her vulva. She appears to be laughing.

The sculpture is called Inghean Bhaoith, just as the early abbess was. But why should this naked self-exposing hag sport a nun's name? And such an odd one, for Inghean Bhaoith—" daughter of madness"—is hardly a name suggestive of sanctity. Did Burren nuns once moonlight as bawdy dancers? Or was some subtle resemblance between nun and namesake detected by observant locals? (" Holy Mother o' God, Séamus, don't that nekkid hag there remind you of our sainted abbess?") No: the name must have passed from hag to nun, rather than vice versa. Perhaps there was no " abbess" at all, the word a euphemism for the goddess of the locality. Or, if a nun named Inghean Bhaoith actually existed, she may have assumed the goddess's name when she took command of a pre-Christian holy place and sought to associate herself with its prestige.

Most of the camera-toting outsiders—tourists? pilgrims?—arrive ignorant of the Kilnaboy hag's proper name. They call her Sheela-na-gig, an untranslated and possibly untranslatable term recorded in the 1840s from a Tipperary farmer describing a similar sculpture, now the generic for self-exposing stone hags. Scores of Sheelas have been found in churches and other holy places throughout Ireland. While a few remain *in situ*, most have been carted away to Dublin's National Museum, which occasionally lets the lewd ladies reveal them-selves to the public but usually restricts their display to archaeologists, whose research has not answered the question of the bawdy sculptures' origin. Some call them Celtic, others pre-Celtic. As long as the Sheela's cultural genesis remains a subject of debate, we can only guess at her intended meaning.

But there is no question about what we see: a hag assuming various odd postures that force us to look her right in the thigh. In some instances, Sheela—a world-class contortionist—reaches hands around legs to stretch her vulva into a circle the size of her head. In others, as at Kilnaboy, she squats and spreads. (Great *craic*, that Sheela.) She is, incongruously, both young and old. Some Sheelas are skeletal above the waist, flush with life below; sometimes the hag's breasts are sunken and shriveled, her hips round and firm. She is shown frontally; she grins hugely. And when the Sheela smiles, she bares her bum; she is always naked, always displaying her sex. Squeamish scholars call her a symbol of women's reproductive power. But the hag is unmistakably past menopause; her posture cannot conceivably indicate desire for impregnation. Call it a stance of power or a posture of sexual invitation; call it yoni yoga or vulva vaudeville. We may not know what the original sculptors intended her to mean, but we can certainly say this: Sheela-na-gig is one old woman who does more than just wear purple.

My friend Fiona Marron, whose grand unsettling paintings of the hag include several based on Inghean Bhaoith, links the Sheela-na-gig with the Cailleach, arguing that both represent the same transgressive, transformative feminine energy. Earlier Irish, too, probably as-sociated the figures, but such easy association ceased with the coming of Christianity when, like Biddy Early, the hag confronted a clergy that feared her power. By imprisoning her in church walls, the patriarchs simultaneously exalted and dishonored the wild hag. They also attempted to circumscribe the Old One's freedom by tossing a nun's veil on her gray head and concocting a suitably restrained hagiography. Saint Cailleach? Why not? The famous " Lament of the Hag of Beare" is the alleged memoir of a Cailleach who found in the convent a solution to her dissolution. But the hag seems unashamed of her past:

> I do not deem it ill
> That a white veil be on my head;
> Time was when cloths of every hue
> Bedecked my head as we drank good wine...
>
> I had my day with kings
> Drinking mead and wine:
> To-day I drink whey-water
> Among shrivelled old hags.

The only known attempt to canonize the hag failed utterly. The poet could not prevent his " nun" from boasting of her seven consecutive maidenheads and the seven sturdy husbands she had outlived. The hag even hinted that her future held not chastity but an eighth virginity: " The time is at hand that shall renew me."

Her recycled hymen would not be maintained like some holy relic. No, the Cailleach's renewal served one purpose, and one purpose only: to permit the thrill of another deflowering. Age did nothing to depress the Old One's sexual appetite. And her chance of satisfying that appetite was undiminished by an appearance that was, frankly, loathsome. The kindest thing we can say about the Cailleach is that she looked her age. Her few remaining teeth were red, her hair stringy and white. Her wrinkled skin was black and blue, her clothing gray and shabby. A fourteenth-century Burren writer described her as having " a blue face, green teeth, rough hair, bent nails, lumpy forehead, eyes like red berries, large blue-green nose, wide nostrils from which flowed a stream of snot, a turned-up beard on her upper lip." Yeah, and so? The lips beneath her lower beard were flush with lust, which is all that mattered to the hag.

The Cailleach liked to offer free land to any man who could match her strength and stamina. Taken in by the Old One's obvious age and apparent frailty, many died trying to match her pace. In putting strenuous demands upon her lovers, the hag is not alone among Irish goddesses. References to men literally dying to satisfy women's sexual desires can be found in texts as early as the *Book of Invasions*. There, we learn that Ireland's first settler, Cesair, arrived in a boat that was inadequately provisioned, having only three men to fifty women. Delighted to set foot—well, actually, more intimate parts of their anatomy—on solid land after their arduous journey, the crew got busy:

> Lightly they lay and pleasured
> In the green grass of that guileless place.
> Ladhra was the first to die;
> He perished of an embrace.

In short order, only one man was left standing,—err, swimming, because Fintan turned himself into a salmon to escape the women's advances—the others having expired exhausted—but happy, one hopes—in attempts to satisfy the women.

But better to die servicing the hag than to steal what she would gleefully give, we learn from the *dindshenchas*. Once upon a time, the story goes, there were five brothers who were named (aptly, as you will see) Proud, Rash, Evil, Foolish, and Thick. Camping on the Burren one night, the brothers were roasting game over a fire when a leprous hag limped up and begged a morsel. " Beautiful is the hag's eye," Proud leered, then dragged the Old One away so that his brothers would not witness his actions—not that any had spoken a word of restraint or raised an eyebrow in concern.

Behind a rock, Proud assaulted the hag. She may have looked frail, but the Cailleach quickly overpowered Proud and bound him with magical chains. She then limped back to the fire and again begged for food. Asked where Proud had gone, the Old One answered that he had hidden in shame over mistreating such a pathetic creature. The men—who were indeed rash, evil, foolish, and thick, to say nothing of proud—ignored the warning. One by one, they tried to rape the hag; one by one, she overpowered them, until she had them all tied together in her magic chains. (Remember this hag, for we shall meet up with her again up north in Ulster.)

Respectful lovers who matched the Cailleach's vigor were amply, indeed handsomely, rewarded. Of the many tales about the hag's treatment of her favorites, the one I like best tells of Niall of the Nine Hostages and his brothers. Once, so the story goes, noble Niall entered the forest with his brothers. They were all renowned hunters, but that day luck turned against them. The woods were unaccountably silent; even the squirrels had disappeared. As the day wore on, the brothers grew more and more tired, more and more hungry, more and more thirsty.

They found a shady glen in which rose a sweet-water well. The parched brothers ran toward it, then stopped short. For like most mythic places, the well had a guardian—in this case, an especially revolting hag. Picture her, now, if you will: rheumy pale eyes, massive wen on a bulbous red nose, nose

hairs drooping into a moustache, corkscrew beard on sunken chin, goitery throat, pink scalp beneath thin white locks, shrill quavering voice, breasts hang-ing below waist.

The Cailleach offered the lads all the water they could drink. She asked only one small thing as payment. Nothing, really: a kiss, just a kiss. She puckered her wrinkled lips, wiping off the drool with a shaky hand, and awaited the first suitor. Overcome with revulsion, Niall's brothers backed away as one. But Niall was as wise as he was handsome. He took the hag in his arms and gave her not a quick pursed-up peck, but a deep lingering kiss into which he fell as though into a trance. Niall felt his manhood stir. His hands, as though possessing a will of their own, reached beneath the hag's clothing while his own dropped away. Finding the Cailleach's own wet well, Niall drank deeply. He made love to her passionately and intently, joyously and vigorously.

And, when both were satiated, Niall found his partner no longer a wizened hag but a glowing young woman who offered him sweet water and a rich kingdom as well. The ancient hag was none other than the bountiful goddess of the land, source of all wealth and power. When Niall swooningly asked her name, she said simply, " Sovereignty."

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Whenever I hear this marvelous tale, I envision it occurring on the Burren's edge, right near Hag's Head, at a place I have known for decades: the holy well at Liscannor. The association may seem eccentric, for the story is set in forest depths, while only a few trees shade Liscannor. Neither notably large nor unusually situated, the Liscannor " vat" is not particularly picturesque or historic. Unlike Sligo's Tobernault, the holy well is not esteemed as Ireland's most beautiful, or its most famous, as Kildare's Tober Bríde can claim. Nonetheless, when I hear of the Cailleach's well, Liscannor rises unbidden before my inner eye.

Since first entering its precinct with Tom on that long-ago solstice expedition, I have returned to Liscannor too many times to count. I walk the traditional pattern, ritually spiraling three times up and down the slippery hill. I place a few coins in the dinged metal donation box before entering the small stucco well house. There, the clutter invariably overwhelms me: statues, rosaries, scribbled prayers on cardboard, baby pictures, soft drink cans scratched with pleading messages. The offerings are crammed on narrow shelves, suspended from low roof beams, tied to rafters. Holy cards, broken crutches, hand-painted portraits of saints, scraps of clothing. Urgency and pain and hope crowd the dim narrow room. Bits of yarn, reed poppets, unopened envelopes, canes, steel crucifixes, feathers. A ceramic labyrinth plaque. A peace symbol button. An empty mint carton.

At the end of the long foyer, a roofless square opens onto the hillside. Water trickles down from its deep source, blackening the rocks before filling a pool where coins glitter. My own offering makes a little splash as I perform a Celtic ritual now become a Christian devotion. Standing before the trickling spring, I sense uncountable spirits of earlier pilgrims, each the center of a singular life's drama. Sick in soul or body, each knelt as I do, dipping water from the dark sacred pool and whispering a prayer for better times. Afterward I linger over the handwritten notes of recent visitors: mothers of desperately ill children, bereft spouses, job-less fathers, cancer warriors. Years ago I read a message that haunts me still, from someone who, having lost a number of loved ones at once, could barely finish a sentence for grief. Each time I visit Liscannor, I send forth another prayer for that unknown person whose pain so touched my own.

Most prayers at Liscannor are addressed to Saint Bridget, for the shrine bears the name Dabhach Bríde, " Bridget's Vat." For many years the lower ritual circle centered on two identical decrepit statues, each in its own fogged-glass protective box. " Saints Bridget of the phone box," I called them, for they appear to involved in that peculiarly rural Irish penitential practice, placing a long distance call. Renovation has since restricted the number of saints to one; the clouded glass is gone as well. A decade ago the shrine was quiet on Imbolc, only a few devotees turning out to walk the pattern. Now hundreds visit the well on Saint Bridget's day.

Association of Liscannor with Imbolc, however, is relatively recent. The well was traditionally visited six months later, on the harvest feast of Lughnasa. Calendar alterations mean that the feast's date vary from late July through mid-August; in Liscannor, the rites centered on " Garland Sunday"

around August 15. North in Mayo, where tens of thousands still pray their way up pyramidal Croagh Patrick, the feast was fully Christianized. Not so on the Burren. Unmarried folk ascended Slieve-callan, " hag hill," to snatch seasonal pleasures, while at the well near Hag's Head—site of what the great folklorist Máire MacNeill called " one of the most strongly lasting survivals of Lughnasa"—celebrants imbibed sacred water, then danced and sang the night away. " In bygone days," MacNeill records, " the peopled slope was fitfully lit by candles, and tradition fondly asserts that, however wild the night, the candles were unquenchable." Quite quenchable, by contrast, were those suspiciously pagany rituals, which guttered out in mid-century; high Mass is all the Lughnasa Liscannor sees today. But memory of the well's original matron is not so easily extinguished. Personal association is not the only reason I envision Niall's amorous adventure occurring at Liscannor, for its festival reveals which goddess was honored there.

Lughnasa marked the beginning of a season that extended to Samhain on November 1—a season ruled by the Cailleach who, in bygone days, was omnipresent across Ireland. A tied sheaf called " the Cailleach" stood at the center of each field, towards which harvesters cut the grain. Small animals—frogs, corncrakes, partridges, and especially hares, the hag's animal—fled before flails and scythes into that central sheaf. When the field was nearly mown, the workers set up a din, shouting and clanging tools together to " put the hare out of the corn," as folklorist Kevin Danaher attests. Frightened away from the Cailleach, the animals scurried to an unharvested field. Thus the harvesters drove the hag's animals before them as they cut down, again and again, the Old One herself. Because the last stalk cut in a region was an especially potent reservoir of hag power, great care was taken with the ceremony. According to the region, lots were drawn, or blindfolded women took up scythes, or the youngest worker was assigned the deed. This final cutting of the Cailleach was a moment of great power and equivalent danger. Her freed energy brought healing, but were the rite botched, a bitter winter resulted.

Once cut, the Cailleach sheaf was treated reverently. Dressed as an old woman or plaited into a cross, it hung in house or barn until replaced by the next year's sheaf. In many areas, the Cailleach sheaf provided material for spring's Brigit crosses—the same hag-into-virgin motif we encountered in our tale of Niall visiting the well. Here we peer into the deep heart of the Cailleach, for her power derives from this ability to revirgin herself. Some writers, like Barbara Walker who identifies her with Hindu Kali, proclaim the Cailleach ruler of death, offering her connection with harvest as incontrovertible proof. But plants die in that season, not humans. The U.S. Department of Vital Statistics reports that even today, more people die as spring approaches than in autumn. Before food became plentiful year-round, this pattern was stronger; even in lean years, there was more food after harvest than before. Once the cows were driven in—booleyed, from *bó*, the Irish for cow—from the hills and the hay saved, communities enjoyed a period of full-bellied leisure. The Cailleach's season was a time not of privation but of abundance.

I have never witnessed the ritual of the Cailleach sheaf, but a few decades ago, I helped harvest a field near Ardrahan in the traditional way. As in my grandfather's time, we raked in a steady rhythm, our movements patterned into an exhausting exhilarating dance. That day shines in my memory. I can still name the divisions of the raked hay: sop, bart, tram, cock, rick. I recall the heady fragrances, the sting of sweat in my eyes, the pain in my blistering hands, the occasional whistle of a corncrake breaking our panting silence. The hard monoton-ous labor altered my consciousness until time dissolved into one lingering evening, and space pooled within our field's stony boundaries. Paradoxically, it is the specifics of that particular ordinary day and that particular unremarkable hayfield that I hold fixed in memory. As did Paddy Kavanagh, I found " a star-lovely art / In a dark sod. / Joy that is timeless! O heart / That knows God!"

Such timeless, boundaryless specificity—what anthropologist Clifford Geertz called " a motionless present, a vectorless now"—is Cailleach time, which moves from moon to moon, harvest to harvest. It is pagan time, rooted in the eternal return rather than the once-off redemption; it is sensuous, embodied time, singular moments lived in specific locations. In the mosaic of Irish places, such time serves as glue, storytelling as grout. Elsewhere time and place have been sundered, a process that began with the invention of mechanical clocks. Earlier timekeepers like sundials were cemented in place, but clocks made time external to the passage of sun or moon or stars above a specific bog or lake or hill. This development radically changed our lives, historians John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey claim,

making possible precise punctuality and as a result changing " the nature of work and, subsequently, the rest of life, making time scarce."

Time is not yet scarce in rural Ireland, which went from pre- to post-Industrial without stopping in the middle. There is still something called the " Irish hour" (however long it takes to do it) parallel to the " Irish mile" (however long it takes to get there). It drives tourists crazy when a destination retreats like a mirage " just a mile up the road, now," or when the band advertised for half-nine enters the pub promptly at half-ten. The old joke goes that a scholar, working on a Spanish-Irish dictionary, could find no Irish equivalent for *mañana*. He called a native Irish speaker, who explained that " there is no word in Irish that conveys quite the same level of urgency."

The Irish remain stubbornly unconstrained by objective measurement, a heritage from that time when, as Galway writer Martin Ross and her partner Edith Somerville put it, " people told time by the sun, and a half-an-hour either way made no difference to anyone." One night at Máire's, Tom took offense when a German farmer from Ardrahan belittled his neighbors as being unnaturally unpunctual. No, Tom argued, it is clock time that strains against nature. In an impassioned oration, Tom made a startling claim. " In bygone days, hours didn't matter, even years didn't matter. No one knew their ages, Uli. A widow in middle age might marry a man the age of her grandson, Uli, without any comment whatsoever."

Speaking with the lofty certainty that religion once affected, science today claims that diminished estrogen—the word is etymologically linked to " estrus"—results in diminished eroticism. Yet testosterone, alleged source of men's sexual vigor and an etymological cousin of " testy," increases proportionately in older women. Could legends of the Cailleach's stupendous sexual energy offer as much insight as hormonal assays by biologists peering down culturally ground lenses? What is nature, what culture? In truth, we have no idea. As Simone de Beauvoir points out, " Neither history nor literature has left us any valid account of the sexuality of older women. The subject is even more taboo than the sexuality of older men." Could the lustful Cailleach encode information about the sexual potential of older women?

Armed only with the flaccid comfort of contemporary science, a vigorous older woman must puzzle out for herself what transformation into a Cailleach means. One of these seekers, the great Irish memoirist Nuala O'Faolain, took a midlife visit to the Burren that made her piercingly aware of a still-vital sexuality. Hiking over rock hills near Ballyvaughan, she felt passion coursing through her veins undiminished—nay, stronger than in her youth. " Is it that a woman's life is bracketed by two hormonal tides, and one goes out, in middle age, and she runs down the beach after it?" she pondered. In words as searing as those of the Hag of Beare, O'Faolain laments her isolation, for unlike the Cailleach, she does not remember—ah, none of us remembers—how to grow young again.

But O'Faolain intuits an answer. " It is not about sex," she muses, " it is about creation." Her insight is appropriate to the setting, for the Burren offers Ireland's only true creation myth. It is a fragmentary story, not more than a snapshot: the land was born when the Cailleach dumped out the contents of her apron. Slievecallan, Knockycallanan, Slieve Echtghe—the mountains of the hag have their genesis in that ridiculously offhand gesture of the Cailleach. Such casual creativity reminds me of the Eskimo goddess Aakuluujjusi, who made the world simply by tossing her clothes around. Creativity, these hag stories suggest, can be quite ordinary and undramatic.

These hag tales remind me, too, of what friends say about how, as they age, ordinary life becomes charged with erotic energy. " The whole world has become my lover," says one, describing in plain words what psychologist Erik Erikson theorized was the psychosexual goal of successful aging: the " generalization of sensual modes that can foster and enrich bodily and mental experience." Far from being diminished, the older woman finds her sense of vital connection—sex, creation, call it what you will—expanding, expanding, expanding. Perhaps this is why the Cailleach was always described as a giant, standing boldly astride rivers, her body towering over even the highest of her mountains.

But what about that mythic transformation, withered hag into fresh maiden? It defies reason: women grow old; they do not grow young again. Except in Irish myth. There, Cailleach and maiden change places over and over. Indeed, the protean Cailleach specializes in reversals of all sorts. She invented fall sowing, called *Coirce na bhFaoilli* or February's oats, more prolific than spring sowing.

In her Burren landscape, cows are booleyed up the hills in winter and down in summer, a reverse of the usual practice. Time anthropologist Edward Leach has defined such reversals as indicating sacred time, when world-restoring rituals take place. At the juncture of sacred and profane, he argues, time flows backward and " sacred time is played in reverse, death is converted into birth." Cailleach time is a time of miracles. In a timeless ageless moment, situated in a specific endless place, Cailleach becomes maiden once again, and once again, and once again.

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Lately I have turned once again to Yeats, who seemed to have all the answers when, in my dim room above Máire's, I spent my mornings imitating his ballads of tortured love. I read him differently now, no longer expecting to find truth capitalized, more willing to enjoy him as a piece of the human mosaic. I read different poems now too. " The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and " The Host of the Air," however beautiful, now hold little mystery. I turn instead to " Words for Music, Perhaps" to ponder the words of Crazy Jane. Yeats once described a drunken old woman from Loughrea as the inspiration for the most famous hag in modern literature, but Crazy Jane is bigger than any single woman, even one from Loughrea. There are echoes of Biddy Early, who like Jane had public arguments with the clergy, and of the Traveler woman of Ballylee, who like Jane lived with whatever man she chose. Most of all, Crazy Jane seems to me to embody the Cailleach, about whom stories are still told in the region where Yeats lived, stories that embed the hag in a land that bespeaks her wild soulful energy.

" Love is all / Unsatisfied / That cannot take the whole / Body and soul," Crazy Jane says, and I ponder the complexity of who takes, who gives, in love and in life. " A woman can be proud and stiff / When on love intent," says Crazy Jane, and I ponder what that curiously androgynous language implies about women's sexual potential. " Fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul," cries Jane, and I ponder the unity of opposites, the maiden hidden within the hag hidden within the maiden. I ponder how acceptance can combine with strength when Crazy Jane calls herself "... a road / That men pass over / My body makes no moan / But sings on." In Yeats's inspired words, I hear echoes of the stone Sheelas, of the ageless stone of the Burren, of the historical Cailleachs of the country I long ago learned to love.

Although I have never been able to answer my Eskimo grandfather's question about where I come from, with each passing year I know more fully where I am going. Like every women, I am turning into her, into the wild creative hag who has always lived in my soul. Crazy Jane and the Sheela and the Cailleach all whisper me the same secret: that there is more passion in a woman's heart than her body can contain. That she lives timelessly in boundless space that is, simultaneously, the specific located present. That survival means not stasis but endless renewal. And that to live fully we must learn to dance, naked and laughing and wild.
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