Becoming Native

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With relentless beaks, a squad of crows attacked a winter field. It was a fine fair Irish field, sweeping upwards in the pale sunlight towards a dark bulwark of rhododendrons surrounding a single gnarled oak, beneath which three ruddy cattle grazed. Welcoming this peaceable scene as an excuse to slow my journey, I parked on the verge and walked to the field's iron gate.

Shrieks rent the air as another crow spiraled down to invade the feast, some carrion invisible from the roadside. Black birds of Macha, I thought, winged servants of the war-goddess.

Something caught my eye. Something fluttering in the chill wind. A flag. Odd, I thought, a flagpole in the middle of a field. And what was that atop it? Red, white, blue. I vaguely recognized the pattern. The Stars and Bars? Whoever would be flying the Confederate flag over here? But no. Too many crosses. Colors in the wrong places. What was it? The Union Jack.

Without realizing it, I had crossed the border. I felt suddenly light-headed. My breath escaped in a painful sigh. I had not known that I was holding it.

It was mid-afternoon. Eight hours earlier I had left Dublin, intent on beating the morning traffic up the N1 en route to a meeting in Belfast. I should have been at the border well before noon. But I had been killing time, finding one then another reason to postpone crossing, for the first time in two decades of visiting Ireland, into the North.

North. It is a touchstone word for me, one that in most contexts connotes home, familiarity, a known place. An Alaskan most of my life -- one of those rare people who can unsettle Canadians by describing their country as *"down here"* -- I hear in *"north"* moose and aurora, pastel shadows on snow, blueberry bogs and white birch. Whenever dislodged from my moorings, I dream of flying like a raven over intricate braided rivers, among mountains up whose rocky faces scramble sharp-footed sheep. Always, in the dream, I am heading north.

This is, I realize, an eccentric reaction to the word. Most temperate-zone folks hear *"north"* as winter and darkness. Rather than arabesques of asparagus grass and lingonberries on the floor of a boreal forest, they envision white treeless wastes. North is fright, loneliness, even desperation -- Perry bent against an impossibly frigid wind, ghost ships held captive by eerie unbreakable ice. North is the farthest remove from home, a place where Frankenstein's monster wanders mournfully, distant from all the known safe world. There is one exception: American cities. Our prevailing winds blow south, carrying odors towards society's less fortunate. In our cities, north signifies purity and cleanliness, in contrast to the down and dirty South Side.

North is also directionally *"up."* Because our maps are oriented with north at the top, we unconsciously picture things tending southward as though pulled by gravity. Moving north, we imagine, entails significant, even herculean, effort. Students look at me oddly when I describe the Laurentian Divide, above which rivers flow north. *"But isn't that uphill?"* their quizzical expressions imply.

North is an oddly fractal word, etymologically related only to words about itself, like *"northerly"* and *"northward,"* or to the people who come from that direction, Norse and Nordic and Norwegian. Yet behind its unyielding glacial face, north is secretly solar, conceptually linked to the sun's motion. North is classically defined as the cardinal point opposite the sun's position at noon. That definition presumes a northern hemispheric vantage, for when you observe dawn from the earth's alleged topside, you see the sun roll southwards towards midday. As the year progresses, the sun rises daily further south, as though retreating in dread. Watching sunrise up here, north stands to our left, so words for *"left"* are tainted by the direction. Our English word derives from European originals that meant worthless, old, weak. Thus *"left behind"* is a reasonable locution, for why not discard the useless? And how about *"sinister"*: Latin makes *"left-handed"* even more threatening than in English, while the French *"gauche"* is clumsy, awkward.

In Irish, the solar symbolism of directions is close to the surface. North is *tuaisceart*, a word implying left-handedness; cousin words are *tuais*, arrogance; *tuaithe*, curse; *tuairech*, foreboding; *tuaichthe*, anguished heart. By contrast *deisceart* means south, right-handed, turning sunwise. A relative, *deosil*, means to move as the sun does -- by extension, to follow nature's order; whatever moves left, anti-sunwise, implicitly goes against nature. What the world calls Northern Ireland is to the Irish *An Tuaisceart, "the North,"* six counties separated from the other 26 by the British Parliament in 1921. Politics aside, to speak its name evokes a ancient hidden dread.

America calls the region Ulster, but that incorrect usage is rarely heard in Ireland. *An Tuaisceart* is only part of Ulster, three of whose counties -- Cavan and Donegal, and Monaghan, whose name I bear but to which I have no ancestral connection -- were left in the Republic at partition. The names of the other six counties of the North have been familiar to me since childhood. There is Antrim, whose green glens call us home. Armagh, where bold Phelim Brady lived. Danny Boy's Derry, Nell Flaherty's Tyrone. Star of the Country Down, Fermanagh Highland Reel -- names that roll off my tongue as easily as Mayo and Galway. I never saw these counties, though not for lack of opportunity: residing at Annaghmakkerig, I was just miles shy of the border; vacationing in Carlingford, I looked at the blue-gray Mountains of Mourne sweeping down to the sea. But I never crossed into the North.

Not that I feared violence; tourists are rarely targeted by Irish sectarians and besides, I could as easily get killed in Chicago as in Belfast. But something kept me south of the border. As much as the word *"north"* comforts me, the phrase *"the North"* threatens, for my mother's family is a nest of anti-colonial agitators. Every generation sees cousins and uncles playing their part in the patriot game. I have been to Kilmainham to find the cell where great-uncle Pa was interned and to Portlaoise to visit a cousin imprisoned for conveying a load of gelignite in his car -- headed, of course, north.

My grandfather was fiercely anti-British. Although John Gordon never to my knowledge lobbed a bomb nor ferried explosives, he planted incendiary devices deep in our hearts. Pop regularly trumpeted the strains of British rule: evictions, poorhouses, famine. He taught me about the Battle of the Boyne and Cromwell's massacres, about quislings and Black-and-Tans. Pop described how he escaped Mayo poverty, four years before the Easter Rising, by stowing away on a boat to England, where he planned to earn passage to America. British attitudes towards the Irish infuriated him. *"They made us sleep in latrines,"* Pop would say, still furious after a half-century. As a perplexed girl I pictured people in sleeping bags on the floors of large public rest rooms, before learning that Pop meant the bothies, shacks with no separate toilet where immigrant Irish laborers stayed. Pop would not forgive anyone of

English heritage, no matter how many generations removed. Once I brought a new boyfriend to meet him. All he had to hear was the name. *"British,"* he said, and turned away.

As soon as I left home, I became a Quaker and stopped singing rebel songs, but good intentions alone do not extinguish the rage of generations. Once, hanging by a strap on the London tube, I glimpsed the hot depth of my conditioning when I found myself calculating how many faces around me were colonial -- Pakistani, South African, Irish. Just then a blonde, thin-nosed woman bumped against me. Hate-filled words at the ready, I turned as though invaded. That woman may not have been English, but she -- well, she looked it. In a flash, I categorized her as the oppressor I had been reared to hate and fear. Swallowing my words, I realized that although I may not boil like my grandfather, something simmers still. I never went to the North, not to avoid British territory, but to steer clear of that stormy territory within.

And so, that winter day, I found reasons to forestall my arrival at the border. There was tea to drink, and the paper to read right down to the adverts, and then -- oh yes! -- I needed some of that lovely effervescent vitamin C from the chemist. Then -- of course! -- I was passing Clare's office and we must have lunch. Afterwards, instead of going back to the highway, I meandered north from Slane on little backroads where everything looked consolingly Irish.

By my calculations, the border lay ahead twenty miles or so. I envisioned something like the Alaska-Canadian crossing: a gate with uniformed guard asking what was my business, how much money was I carrying, how long would I be staying. I rehearsed answers. Could entry be denied? Would there be enquiries about my family history? I began to wish for iron nerves. I pictured accordion wire inside the walls at Portlaoise, the young soldier who wrote down every word I spoke, my unsteadiness after my shoe soles had been removed to search for contraband.

Then, without warning, I was across. No guards, no tollbooths, no check-points. Not even a welcome sign. I had thought I was still lingering in the Republic, but suddenly I was in the North, leaning against an iron gate watching the Union Jack flap in the breeze. Across the field, the crows screamed.

Had I gone to the North a dozen years earlier, I would certainly have encountered soldiers and checkpoints in Europe's most heavily militarized rural area. Had I come during the marching season, had I gone to the tense encampment at Gavaghy Road in Portadown, I would surely have seen armed cars and armed men. Had I stuck to the N1, I would have noticed money-changers at the border. My old roadmap, from twenty years ago, lists the approved border crossings and warns, *"A motorist crossing the frontier by roads other than approved roads is liable for very severe penalites, including confiscation of the car."* My new map has no such warning.

At that time, at that place, nothing. On one side of the border, crows and hay; on the other, crows and hay. Rivers, oceans, mountain ranges are boundaries, hindering the passage of birds and plants and humans. But unless something marks a border -- a gate, a sign, an armed guard -- a traveler can cross unaware. Still screaming, the crows flew off to the south.

Back on the road, I tried to detect northness in the land. Until I saw that Union Jack, I had felt no difference. But afterwards, the fields seemed a bit larger, the houses a trifle more substantial, the roads wider. I remembered how, when I first came over, I had been warned by my aunt against speaking to travelers -- well, no, she said *"tinkers,"* the far less polite term. At the time, I could not tell a tinker from a tailor -- everyone looked Irish to me -- but

within a few months, I found myself noticing a subtle height of brow, a slightly different set to the jaw. Like Mark Twain discerning the Mississippi's wave patterns, I found it impossible to unlearn what I had been taught. The best I could do was to make a point of always speaking courteously to travelers.

I suddenly realized that here I, like the tinkers of whom Della had been so suspicious, was part of a persecuted minority. My car had Irish plates; I had fleeting visions of being stopped by gardai -- or whatever they called them up here. I drove carefully, afire with fantasies of detention by armed men. I forced away these unsettling thoughts. Emain Macha lay near, the great Celtic ringfort named for the black-winged goddess of war. I knew I would never come north again, so I turned towards Armagh.

It rained steadily as I spiraled up the green mound, wondering why I had bothered. But if the rath is unremarkable, the view from its summit is breathtaking. I rested against a huge bare beech, taking in the peaceful winter landscape. Below, I saw clusters of leafless trees, dark bastions against the green and bronze of winter fields. What would have been the view from the hill in ancient times? More trees, certainly, although nothing like the impenetrable forests that began to fall with first farmer's arrival. Myth, which tells us that Macha's husband Nemed personally cleared Ireland's first plains for her, truncates history, which according to the *"landnam"* (*"settlement"* in Old Norse) theory followed this pattern: first small areas were cleared for gardens; as soil wore out, gardens were moved to freshly-cleared land while earlier clearings became pasture for increasingly important herds; slowly the abandoned clearings became the great ancient plains.

We do not know how earliest settlers viewed the forests, but the Celts deeply reverenced trees; indeed, the word *"druid"* is related to that for *"oak."* According to Celtic law, trees came in classes just as people did -- the list went from *airig fedo* or *"nobles of the woods"* like oak and yew, through *aithig fedo, "commoners of the woods"* including alder and willow, right down to *losa fedo* or *"bushes of the woods"* that included gorse -- and there were appropriate penalties for inappropriate cutting. This sense of arboreal sanctity continued into Christian times, when the mystic Columba proclaimed from his sacred grove in Derry the sinfulness of cutting down oaks.

But in 1169, Norman law invaded Ireland with its alien concepts. Land became property, a resource for extraction and sale. Much of Ireland's forest literally sailed away as the tall masts for Britain's imperial navy. But sufficient forests -- called *"fastnesses"* in Ireland -- remained that rebels used them as citadels, so Elizabeth the First ordered all Irish woodlands destroyed. Of two million cleared acres in Ireland in 1700, nearly one and a half million had been deforested in the previous century. In many cases land was sold to English entrepreneurs for less than its timber's value, making *"the feathers pay for the goose,"* as the saying went. Soon treeless Ireland was importing wood for building, and only a fraction of Irish land remained in Irish hands.

An Ulster song with a piercing plaintive melody remembers ancient attitudes in the face of the new extractive economy:

> Oh bonnie Portmore, I am saddened to see
> Such a woeful destruction of your ornament tree,
> For it stood on your banks for many's the long day
> Till the long boats from Antrim came to float it away.
>
> Oh the birds in the forest, they bitterly weep,

Saying where shall we shelter, where shall we sleep,
For the oaks and the ash are all cutted down,
And the walls of bonnie Portmore are all tumbled the ground.

Today native Irish woodlands are all but extinct. As the great forests disappeared, invaders appeared. With early farmers came seeds, some imported intentionally but others carried over unwittingly in animal fodder and packing. Exotic edibles, ornamentals and weeds released into deforested regions spread further, faster, than the same plant on undisturbed land. In Ireland, such plants arrived like Normans: first invited over, they laid claim to more and more land. Where once oak and ash had shadowed the ground, now were fields of marrow and potato, gardens of roses and rosemary. Language remembers the successive invasions. Oak *(dara)* and ash *(fuinseog)* have true Irish names, but marrow and potato, rose and rosemary came more recently, their names *mearog* and *prata*, *ros* and *ros Mhuire* immigrating along with them.

The invasions continue; Ireland today has fewer native plants than any other European land. Irish has no word yet for rhododendron, none for fuchsia, though they are two of today's most common species. I remember the first time I saw fuchsia blooming in Ireland. The plant looked familiar, but its size -- it towered over me -- was bewildering. I pulled a branch closer and examined the blossoms. Fuchsia? Wasn't that a small potted plant on my mother's porch? But this was fuchsia, big as you please, escaped from Irish gardens to the roadsides to intertwine with native brambles in tangled hedgerows. Rhododendrons seem, at first glance, to be similar escapees. They are, however, native to Ireland -- or were, some 425,000 years ago. Changing climate killed off the rhododendron, which was reintroduced a century ago. Finding Ireland's acid soil ideal and facing no natural enemies, rhododendron is now strangling the remaining Irish oak forests.

On Emain Macha, I felt overwhelmed by the sense of invasion of which even the trees seemed to speak. I looked out to the north where, twenty centuries after the myth war between Ulster and the rest of Ireland, conflict yet continues. Perhaps we should not be surprised. In Ulster -- as in Palestine and the Balkans -- cultures collide like tectonic plates. Myth and archaeology agree that for nine thousand years, wave after wave of settlers have arrived on these shores. Except for the first foragers, each arriving group encountered the resistance of earlier settlers. Three hundred years ago, another group boated over from Scotland -- this time, not foragers or farmers, but Protestant merchants and workers seeking a new life. The ensuing conflict over their presence repeats the pattern of Ulster history.

But those who objected to the new arrivals were former immigrants turned native. The ancient peoples of Ireland -- whether we call them Fir Bolg and Fomorian and Milesian as the myths do, or Neolithic and Celtic as do archaeologists -- each became by turns Irish. The same transformation can be traced in historic times. The Normans became *"more Irish than the Irish,"* as the saying goes. And who is more Irish than William Butler Yeats, that Anglo Protestant? From Ireland's beginnings, each arriving people has gone through the process that American ecologist Wes Jackson calls *"becoming native to this place."* Ulster's Protestants are only the latest to tackle this adventure.

The sun was lowering itself in the western sky. Time to get moving again. As I descended Emain Macha, I found myself humming *"Carrickfergus,"* a haunting air I have known since childhood. Checking my map to locate my route from Armagh, I was startled to realize that Carrickfergus was just above Belfast on the sea. My eyes drifted across Ulster, my mind moving like a radio dial as I heard snatches of inner melody. Beautiful Kitty with her pitcher of milk from the fair in Coleraine. Bangor and Donaghadee, with six miles between them.

Lovely Martha, flower of sweet Strabane. My Lagan love. Familiar songs in this unfamiliar land.

But from the black letters that spelled B-E-L-F-A-S-T, no melodies came, only a list of names in a news announcer's piercing voice: Shankill Road, Stormont, Ormeau Road, names connected with the Troubles. Like Banja Luca, like Jerusalem, the word *"Belfast"* calls forth images of war: burning overturned cars, the silhouette of an angry boy lobbing something at a soldier, slogans defacing the walls of poor tiny homes. I know there are in Belfast tidy gardens of roses, bookstalls with shelves of poetry, cats soaking up sun in shop windows. Yet those are not the images that rise unbidden at the word.

As I drove into the city, I saw no evidence of conflict as the peace process wound forward once again. It was a gray winter day, rainy and cold, like any rainy cold winter day anywhere in Ireland. Realizing how long I had been driving, I stopped for gas, filled my tank, went inside to pay. When I handed my cash to the clerk, I received only a stare in return. Looking down, I realized I had neglected to change punts for pounds. I dug out a credit card and stood, wordless, as my sale was rung up. I returned to my car in a furious blur. That store clerk was Protestant, I raged to myself -- of course he was, aren't they all merchants, aren't half the Catholics in Belfast unemployed. He had recognized me as Catholic and tried to humiliate me, acting as though my Irish money were worthless, rejecting my people by rejecting my punts. Opposing this voice was another that pleaded calm down, calm down, anyone can see you're American, there was nothing ill intended, don't thirty years of Quakerism count for anything, calm down.

I had no proof the clerk was Protestant, just as I had no proof the woman on the London tube was English. But he looked it, I thought, although I cannot say what Protestant looks like. Do I look Protestant now? How many years does it take? Head down over the wheel, mind and heart racing, I wondered, how do people live here? How stifle their fear and rage? How handle the unrelenting sense of historical oppression? Then I thought, this is how black people feel in America. This is how my Eskimo friends have felt, natives in an invaded land. And suddenly I recognized my own invader's heart. Recognized what it is to love a land to which you have no right, only a yearning to make a home. Recognized that I was only singing half the song.

"It is a hard responsibility to be a stranger," Ulster poet John Hewitt said. I am a descendent of such strangers, people who left their original native place to find a new one. My first known Monaghan ancestor, great-great-grandfather Michael, came from Meath to join the Union Army during the Civil War -- not to free slaves but to gain citizenship. He married Mary Farrell of Longford, whose obituary makes no mention of her Irish birth; nor do their granite headstones in West Point Cemetery; they erased their Irishness to become American. Michael and Mary emigrated to make a better lives for themselves, just as John Gordon and Margaret Dunleavy did fifty years later, just as Scottish settlers did who became part of the Ulster Plantation.

People move around; that is history's most unarguable fact. I live on land stolen from its original inhabitants, who probably stole it from even earlier ones. Once in place, people begin to naturalize themselves. Michael Monaghan, Mary Farrell, Margaret Dunleavy never saw Ireland again. Except for one trip back when he was 80, my grandfather John Gordon stayed in America. Perhaps it is for the best. I am one of fifty million Irish-heritage people around the globe. If we all returned to our ancestral homeland, there would be no more cheery cottages surrounded by green fields; we'd be cheek-by-jowl across the midlands and

out to sea. We are all of us invading rhododendrons; we cannot just be potted and sent back where we started. We must learn to become natives where we land.

Shaken by my outrage at the petrol station, I drove to my lodgings on the Antrim Road. My hostess was a woman dressed in exquisite taste, friendly but politely distant. I cannot, like most of my Irish friends, tell Protestant from Catholic on sight. I do not usually worry over this lack, but that night I found myself examining pictures on the high papered walls until a photo of Lourdes sent waves of relief flooding through me. *"Safe! Safe! She's Catholic!"* This atavistic tribalism unsettled me. In the North, suddenly, I was Catholic again.

That night I sat up by the fire with my hostess, drinking tea and eating sweet cakes. She was from Omagh, where a year earlier an IRA bomb had killed 28 people, wounding 200 more. Two of her relatives were hurt, one maimed for life. Although my hostess spoke calmly, she stirred her tea relentlessly, back rigid, eyes unseeing. I recognized the behavior of the traumatized. She had not been back to that part of Omagh. She had not gone back, she repeated. She wanted to remember it as it had been. Before. Before. I sat mostly silent, wrenched with familial guilt. It could have been my uncle who convoyed bombs into that tiny Northern town. It could have been my aunt, hearing from the police that her husband had been jailed. It could have been my cousin, learning the names of girls her age, dead at her father's hand.

I once asked a jailed cousin how he had decided political change was worth the lives of children. *"Don't you always ask the hard questions,"* his next letter said. He never directly answered me, reciting instead the litany of oppression my grandfather taught me. These men the world calls terrorists offer historically documented reasons for murder. I am certain that if I spoke to my cousin's Protestant counterparts, I would hear equivalent reasons, for evil has indeed been done, and on both sides. And so both sides hold tight a map of history dominated by what Protestant peace leader John Dunlop calls *"a mountain of memories"* that shadows daily interactions like Emain Mach does Armagh. Like the *dindshenchas*, the place-poems that tell mythic stories, Ireland's place-names tell of cultural collision: the Siege of Derry, the Battle of the Boyne, Long Kesh, Enniskillen. I have seen grown men cry when they speak these names. I have seen fists clench when they hear these names. And I have looked into the unseeing eyes of whose who cannot locate, on this map, the road out of the past. Gavaghy Road. Omagh. The Bogside. The *dindshenchas* of conflict.

It continues because, as Ulster poet Louis MacNeice says, *"each one in his will/ binds his heirs to continuance of hatred."* I have myself been so bound. As my grandfather recited Irish history, he taught me what Church of Scotland minister Alan Falconer describes as the *"coercion mentality"* of the Catholic Irish. Through centuries of occupation, we have forged a set of images that define us as victims, our lands stolen, our religion suppressed. Protestants, by comparison, have a *"siege mentality"* that positions them in the midst of dangerous antagonists who would eradicate both lives and culture. My reaction to the clerk was typical; my heart speaks so fluently the language of fury, resentment, resistance that I interpreted his silence as yet another victimization. The clerk, if he were indeed Protestant, may have read my offering of Irish punts as yet another proof of Catholic desire to rule -- to overrule -- his country. In tectonic collision zones like Belfast, such tiny interactions form a mountain of misunderstanding soon engraved with what Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf calls *"the spiral of vengeance."*

But immigration -- invasion -- is inevitable. My grandparents left Ireland for America, my parents left the Lower 49 for Alaska, I left Alaska for the midwest, all of us pursuing a better life. Its cost? The sensuous familiarity of place, a cost that I have paid. Although I am not

native to Alaska -- that word is reserved for its indigenous people -- I know its plants and seasons and animals, the taste of lingonberries and of upriver salmon, the acrid smell of fall highbush cranberry, the pink ripple of aurora. Decades of travel in Ireland have made it a second homeland, where my senses recognize the bright red of winter haws and the sharp green of monkey-puzzle, the light tang of gorse and the languid wetness of winter dawn. In the American midwest, I am what the Irish call a *"blow-in,"* a fine botanical word that captures my feeling of having just arrived on winds of change. Moving there, I experienced the sense of mournful dislocation Hewitt describes:

> Often you will regret the voyage,
> wakening in the dark night to recall that other place
> or glimpsing the moon rising and recollecting
> that it is also rising over named hills,
> shining on known waters.

In midlife, I find myself in a land where, for the first time, I do not recognize the plants: what is edible, what blooms when, what sets seed when. Scents are new; seasons change differently. After several years of feeling at sea, I found a park whose great woodlands remind me of both Ireland and Alaska. There I study my new home's trees. Some, like light-needled tamarack, I recognize from Alaska; others, like thick-limbed beech, from Ireland; some, like alder and willow, from both. But so many to learn: honey locust and sycamore, ginko and magnolia. The first time I recognized the lacy winter dance of catalpa, I felt a cascade of relief, as though I were finally putting down roots, as though I might yet become what Hewitt calls *"as native in my thought as any here."*

When I moved, I suffered dislocation but no danger. How different for those ancients who aimed small boats at a blue cloud on the horizon. Although they must have missed familiar berry patches and hunting grounds, they had no time to mourn. Before stores of food from home were exhausted, it was imperative to learn what was edible, what poisonous, what rare, what common. As Virgil said, *"it is well to be informed about the winds, about the variations in the sky, the native traits and habits of the place, what each locale permits, and what denies."* But, without pocket botanical guides nor time to experiment, how did they survive? I believe the American legend of the first Thanksgiving -- when the Wamapanoag showed the English how to make succotash from beans and corn, how to hunt wild turkey, what berries were ripe and ready -- encodes the normal progression of settlement, earlier peoples helping newcomers become natives. That more bitter truth of American settlement, exemplified by the murder of the Roanoke chief Pemisapan when he refused to support indigent English settlers, does not erase the fact that friendly exchanges also occurred on this continent, just as they must have in Ireland.

In such friendly exchanges, I believe women played an important part, for their gathered foods accounted for as much as eighty percent of the nourishment of prehistoric people. I envision a woman invader learning from a friendly native which plants could cut a child's fever, which were tasty and nourishing in spring soup, which made a good insect repellant. This picture comes readily to mind because that is how I learned, from older wise women. I remember - among many such memories - being led to a secret patch of chantarelles, a woodsy, nutty mushroom that preserves well, in a stand of primal spruce. Liz Berry had brought along foraging bags, but we found so many mushrooms that we stripped off our shirts and made additional sacks out of them. We returned home half-naked, giddy with abundance, forever bonded in our secret harvest. Surely that day repeats a common pattern in gathering economies.

Such friendly intercourse was not the only way immigrants became native. I know that from looking in the mirror. I am Irish on both sides -- left and right, as my grandfather used to say. But I have fair hair and pale eyes, the heritage of Viking invaders. Historically, the Vikings did not build settlements in the Irish west or midlands, lands from which I trace my ancestry. They raided, they raped, they were gone. *"The sea spewed forth floods of foreigners over Erin,"* says the Annals of Ulster for 820, *"so that no haven, no landing place, no stronghold, no fort, no castle might be found, but it was submerged by waves of Vikings and pirates."* My blue eyes are the genetic imprint of one of those pirates.

And who was she, my long-ago ancestor, first of her dark-eyed family to bear a blue-eyed child? Some young woman, nubile and strong, kidnapped from her village and subdued by force? Was she gang-raped, so that she did not even know which of the yellow-haired invaders left her with child? Or was she an older woman who endured invasion of her body to save her children? And the child. Was the child accepted by siblings and cousins? Did he grow up angry at rejection? Was she hurt by village gossip about her absent father?

But in spinning this fantasy I have perhaps been trapped by that coercion mentality Falconer describes. It is possible that these eyes, this fair hair, come from not from rape but love. Let me try it differently. Let me envision my foremother as a lusty woman so enchanted with the piercing blue eyes and bright hair of the muscular Vikings that she offered herself for a night, or many nights, of passion with one or more. Let me imagine that ancient pirate whose eyes I inherited came back, year after year, when he went a-viking from his northern home. Let me picture him dying, my ancestress by his side, happy after years of love.

I am both immigrant and invader, descendent of immigrants and invaders. I am Irish; it cannot be otherwise. I may even have Protestant blood, despite generations of Roman Catholicism. My grandfather used to deny fiercely that Gordon was a Scottish name. *"In Mayo,"* he instructed us, *"Gordon is an Irish name."* When I learned there was a Gordon tartan, I was baffled but continued, as instructed, to deny we were Scottish. Yet after Pop died, we learned that the first Gordon had arrived in Mayo less than 200 years ago. East Mayo, where the *"Irish Gordons"* live, is near enough to Ulster that my maternal ancestor was probably a Scots blow-in, more likely Presbyterian than Roman Catholic.

Who knows the secrets held in genes? The Polish woman with Hun eyes. The black man with Cherokee hair. Our genes travel like migrating seeds until we are all mixed and mingled. There is no *"Irish"* nor *"American,"* no *"Catholic"* or *"Protestant"* in the great melting pot of the body.

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