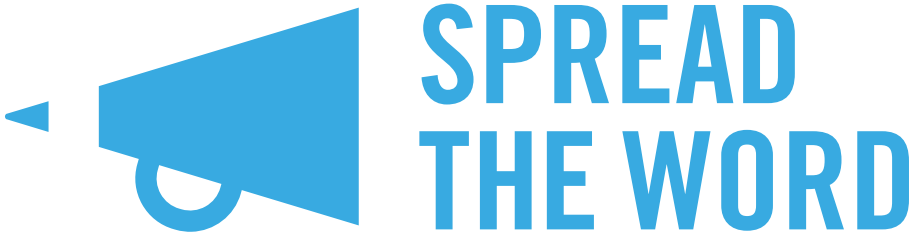
SPREAD
THE WORD

2017 Highly Commended:
Mudlarking
by
Kerri ní Dochartaigh

About the author page 20

"If self is a location, so is love:

Bearings taken, markings, cardinal points,

Options, obstinacies, dug heels, and distance,

Here and there and now and then, a stance."

[Seamus Heaney]

The year my Father was born, grown men and young wains alongside one another, from both sides of the water in the city of Derry-Londonderry, played football matches on top of a frozen and unbearably beautiful River Foyle for weeks on end. For many of these individuals that Winter of 'The Big Freeze' would be the first and last time they would ever 'set foot' on the other side of their fiercely divided city. Catholic lads in left wing went well beyond the mid-way point on the ice, Protestant goalies pushed right up to within inches of the quay, far away from the safety of the 'waterside' where they belonged; each and every one of them a foreigner in that alien, temporary and utterly

neutral zone within their home town; all historical and imagined boundaries the river normally created now displaced, dislocated; hidden from all view.

The year I was born, Madonna's song 'Borderline' reached number one in Ireland. My Island was the only place in the whole wide world that this song gained such acclaim. Madonna's 'Borderline' was a made up boundary her love kept being pushed over. I had my own borderline; somewhat different from hers. My borderline runs for 310 miles and separates the North of my beautiful Island from the South. My borderline is geographical in that it roughly follows water courses, in accordance with remnants of 17th Century county limits. My borderline, like the boundary created by the River Foyle that froze solid in 1963 is, in reality, a political line no-one can fully understand, no matter how strong the charcoal strokes have been laid on the page throughout the near century it has been being drawn and redrawn for.

The year my Father turned 12, three considerably important events took place.

One winter's evening while he was doing his homework by candlelight because the electric had run out again, on top of the bed he shared with his brothers because there was no desk in their house, he dropped his pencil under the bedframe. When he went under to get it back, the candle set the bed alight. My da, its youngest inhabitant, spent much longer than he should have trying to save his home from burning to the ground, all by himself because his ma' and da' both worked late to put food on the table, as did all of their neighbours in that poverty stricken street in the centre of Derry. By the time the

old lady across the street noticed the thick and thickening smoke, a worryingly long time had passed. My thin, long-limbed, 12 year old father was hauled off the staircase by grown men that assumed they were carrying a dead child in their scorched arms for the first time. He had lost consciousness quite some time before the Fire Brigade arrived, trying, desperately, and with the innocent dedication of a child that has had too much responsibility placed on their small shoulders, to put out the flames in his home. When he became strong enough to leave Hospital, the fire was never spoken of again in his family, in that old Irish way; heads buried deep in the thick squelch of an imaginary bogland where emotions, and the showing of them, was a sign of heathen failure. A few months after the fire, my Father came home from Church one Sunday to the news that his best friend had fallen through the Perspex that was acting as a temporary fix for the broken factory roof at the bottom of their housing estate. He had been playing at being an army man in the last few hours of his life. Nothing marked this deeply traumatizing loss for my Father. He was sent to school the next morning, homework undone and unable to even speak for well over a week afterwards.

That same year, only a handful of months later, the great Seamus Heaney published his deeply moving collection 'North'. It was the poet's first serious steps down the path that would lead to him becoming the voice of an entire nation of people, the voice that rang loud and true on a green island desperately trying to keep their heads above deeply troubled waters; his words digging deeper than even the unfathomable belly of the wild Atlantic Ocean. In the eponymous piece, he explores the purpose and interpretation of his writing whilst walking on a stormy beach in Donegal beside the tumultuous Atlantic;

'I returned to a long strand, the hammered curve of a bay …

The longship… said…

Compose in darkness.

Expect aurora borealis

in the long foray
but no cascade of light. ..

trust the feel of what nubbed treasure

your hands have known.'

My Father, growing up in Derry-a city burned to the ground and defined by an overwhelming sense of loss, knew all about darkness. He, along with all of those around of him, witnessed, first hand such blood-red violence and traumatizing civil war that it almost shattered him into tiny pieces, like the delicate fragments of a broken robin egg, a colour not quite real; a state of existence neither dead nor alive. He and my Mam married young and had us early, as many young ones did during those times; hopeful, I suppose, that building a nest of their own would somehow make the space they inhabited immune to the violence. It didn't, of course.

I grew up in a terraced house on a rough, grey Council estate in Derry-Londonderry, or 'Stroke city' as it would be called decades after my childhood; once the incomprehensibly horrific 'Troubles' had more or less stopped. Rather, I grew up in the garden of that house, spending as much time knee deep in the muck that never ever left

due to the unstoppable rain that swept in from the wild Atlantic. Ours is a past seeped in rust, a history bathed in thick black squelch; mudlarking, always, for our sense of self.

If I had to describe that house I would struggle. I remember a yellow teapot on the top shelf of a chipped red dresser in the Kitchen that looked out onto the garden. If you asked me to describe, on the other hand, that small space enclosed by tall grey walls, filled with the sounds of the next door neighbours' fighting through windows that couldn't close properly; I could outline that garden for you in perfect and minute detail. I spent most of my childhood, no matter what the season, in that concrete jungle of a garden. I was outside every chance I got. I was outside because it simply made no sense to me to be indoors. My Ma and Da would find me, utterly transfixed and bogging dirty: hands holding treasure unthinkable in our half concrete-half muck rectangle of garden. I'd beg them to close their eyes and open their grown up hands so I could fill them with the wonder of the living, breathing, dying world. Broken bricks in the corner of the back yard filled up with ladybirds in descending size order, each limb and wing compared and contrasted against its brother or sister. Frogs would come to our garden from the stream at the bottom of our housing estate to die and I buried each one with a hand-written poem; candle wax dripping onto their hardened bodies in the damp Spring air as the younger me tried to hold too many funeral instruments in her small, freezing hands. It would be two full decades before Richard Louv would give a name to the problem my Mam could see the beginnings of in me during those early days in our housing estate's concrete, impoverished world. Twenty years of civil war: in our public spaces; our sacred and safe places, had resulted in a deep-rooted fear the ripples of which could be felt in more than just the devastating human loss. When whole streets are burned down

and the face of a city changed beyond recognition, very few folk notice their disconnect with the natural world. When you've no home to go to because it's been petrol bombed, seeking the wonder of the wild world is maybe not a priority. Derry was a dark city to be in for my childhood and I was scared. One of my parents is Protestant and the other Catholic. As a child I knew the disgusting words being thrown around my street as loosely as lemonade bottle petrol bombs were about Catholics just like my Mam. I knew everything could just go up in smoke as you were walking to buy electric to feed your squealing meter; (poverty bells.) I was terrified and the only thing that made it all go away was nature- I wanted to reclaim all the things I didn't even know I had lost to those brutal years of violence. I wanted to be in the wildest place I could find that hadn't been stolen from me. The worse things got in our council estate: weans being suffocated with flags for being from the wrong street, punishment beatings, cruelty unnameable; the more I retreated into myself. I stopped talking and would sit at the bottom of our garden facing the grey plaster wall for hours alone. I grew wordless; trapped under the weight of the violence that clung to the air like particles of ice, screaming out from under that frozen river; silently.

My da' moved out of our home when I was nine and my wee brother was seven, after years of a horrific day-to-day life, in a mixed religion/ no-religion marriage, on a housing estate in the epicentre of unthinkable trauma. We didn't see him for many, many years and the distance in between grew darker and more indecipherable; foggy and hazy, like the moon hiding behind cormorant-black clouds on the autumn equinox. Eventually, when I *did* see my father, for those fleeting hours over the years, he seemed

like a ghost, unknown and jarring; a gaping mark left on the surface many moons after the river has dried up. The troubles in Ireland caused many more atrocities than the media could ever hope to bring to the surface, and broke much more than treaties and agreements written in court rooms by wigged individuals.

The winter my Father left our home, both of my parents tired out beyond compare by the struggle of just trying to get by in the midst of a bloody and horrifying day to day life, my brother and I were followed from the top curve of Kinnagoe Bay to our car at the cove by a wild red fox. I remember feeling like he had been sent as a gift to help us through; ours for that stolen walk together, from a place unknown.

Following my da's departure I knew that something had changed in me. The man that had taught me to swim, named the birds in the trees at St Columb's Park and that had read me Beatrix Potter no longer knew who I was, so I taught myself how to forget him in return, and all the pathways of experience that our once shared map had held. The thing I remember most following his leaving was the silence that poured down on top of us and simply would not leave. I was drowning in the loss of his voice; being pushed deep down into the cold, frosted earth by the unbearable weight of mute, dead air. This new soundscape was broken only very occasionally by terrifying white sound and waves of sharp grey interference.

The year I turned twelve; mirroring my Father's experiences without knowing so 'til many years later, three considerably important events took place.

We, ladybirds, frogs, sparrows and all, were petrol bombed out of the home I loved so well. I was in my first year at big school and the marks my cat left on my face when she was wakening me in my smoke filled bedroom left me embarrassed in Assembly for months. My Mother tried to stick it out, desperate to challenge the sectarianism that spilled out of all the cracks in the surfaces of our town; wanting to show us that good was stronger than the violence of hatred. But as the days passed she accepted that the barrier had been built around us, and if we waited any longer we might not make it out from underneath at all.

The summer before my second year at Secondary School we moved from Derry city to Ballykelly- a small village on the road to Limavady. The village, like many others of its kind in and around the area, had been hit hard by social deprivation which in turn had resulted in quite serious levels of alcohol abuse. A bus stop had been built right outside the site that housed one of the darkest tales of horror stemming from alcohol that I have ever heard, even to this day. Nights spent around fires at the very bottom of the Shore Road, looking out across Lough Foyle towards Quigley's Point, terrifying stories would be passed around the circle of us weans. I remember as clear as day the night I listened to one of the Conor brothers tell us all about 'aul boy Logue and how badly he had beaten anything, human or otherwise, that got in his way when he was on the drink. According to legend, by the time his wife had finally been discovered in the back yard, underneath thick ivy and mahogany furniture that had been broken by the man of the house's hands, she was in such a state that five grown men from Glack wept like babies, unable to sleep alone for months after they found her. That one particular violent man had been dead for many, many moons, and I had witnessed and heard of

multiple others that seemed cut with the same thread, dogs being kicked up and down streets, a boy my own age burning his own sister with a cigarette as she begged him to stop, men kicking each other in the head after fallouts they couldn't even remember the root of. In our society here in Ireland, alcohol and unthinkable violence seem to go hand in hand quite a lot of the time and I am sure we are not the only country where this is the case. Nor is it only the males of our species that suffer at the hands of alcohol's grip, it's just that in *this* case, the house that our bus-stop was built in front of happened to have once contained a *man* that brutally abused his family and lost his home, and in *this* instance, everyone around blamed the contents of the bottles that were strewn all over the concrete slabs in that garden. Brown shards of glass; broken parts of a damaged man.

We had been back at School for a fortnight, making it the middle of September. It was one of those mornings that makes ye feel like you have actually been lifted up out of the end of summer and hurled into the middle of a deep winter- dark and darkening, thick grey mist hanging to the tall oaks and dripping quietly onto the fallen branches. My brother was in those middle stages of wakefulness, his tired little boy face almost ethereal against the soft yellow-light glow as the occasional car went past. The bus was late, as usual. Mobile phones had not yet reached us, ours was an innocent and self-reliant stage, and so I wore a wrist watch- a green one, that kept the time like a lighthouse keeper would have once kept his light.

When that ebony black crow came down from the battered, ruined roof, I remember I had been thinking about the way that Autumn smells just after heavy rainfall. All of a sudden, cinematic flapping and the sound of violence filled the space all around us up.

The scene moved in slow motion at first, then switched into an unnameable chaos, like a river that has burst its banks. It took less than a minute, I suspect, for my wee brother to work out that the bird was making only for me; in particular for my face. He tried repeatedly to shoo the crow away and twice it seemed like it was going to leave us, and then came at me again with a seemingly renewed energy both times. It had started to rain, I remember- that drizzling stuff that isn't quite there, like the beginnings of a crescent moon, and my brother, always a gentle soul that loves creatures as much as I do, had finally resorted to fighting back. With his small, soft hands at first, his wet fingers hidden away under the grey wool of his school jumper. At the point when we both knew the crow had set his own stony eyes on my blue ones, my brother lifted the thick blue Geography folder he had dropped moments earlier, and with a force I had never before seen in him, he managed to send the bird away while I stood, terrified, with both hands clawed blood-red; covering my sheet white face. I didn't see the last part of that September morning scene but my brother talks of the crow flying very, very high before swooping down to attack another bird that he couldn't identify. He also talks of the fact that I just kept asking when the bus was going to come, even though he had already walked me up the high hill back to our new house, made me sickeningly sweet tea and wrapped every blanket in our home around me before he called our Mam from the lady three door's up's telephone.

There is a darkness to the world we have been given, and such unthinkable violence in the paths we create along the way. Before that morning, I had never known that there was a map inside of me that would continue to be drawn and redrawn, hidden deep on

the insides of my being, forcing me to line up space and place and time in that outside word with all of those same bits on the inside; a borderline inside of me, like the many outside of me; invisible and utterly incomprehensible. I didn't talk of these events to anyone for many years, and my father never came to see us after they took place; I didn't have the language to reach him.

In the Winter of that same year, only a handful of months later, Seamus Heaney won the Nobel Prize for Literature. My English Teacher cancelled his plan for the lesson on the Friday morning after Heaney received his prize in Stockholm and played us the 51 minute long recording of his speech. In it Heaney talks of living during the Troubles, of violence, language, loss and the importance of writing down one's experience;

'[It] can make an order as true to the impact of external reality and as sensitive to the inner laws of the poet's being as the ripples that rippled in and rippled out across the water in that scullery bucket fifty years ago. An order where we can at last grow up to that which we stored up as we grew.'

In the years between the age of 12 and that of 18 I distanced myself further and further from the land I had grown up in, moving across the border as soon as I finished School. I went to Trinity College in Dublin and quickly taught myself how to forget all the bloodshed, the dark and fearful nights; the wordless silence. I blanked out much of my childhood spent on my war-torn island, and moved away from Ireland entirely at the very first chance I got; vowing never to live on Irish soil again.

There was one image, however, that I could not get out of my waking or my sleeping, painted in coal on my eyelids; embedded on the insides of my being. That charcoal black crow would never leave me be. Graffitied twenty foot tall opposite the theatre in which I watched my first Euripides play in London when I turned 16. The central character in 'The Crow and the Tailor'; the song I had to analyse from Williams' Folk Songs of the Upper Thames (1923) when I studied English folk song. The dark and shockingly human-like figure in Shane Jones' 'Lightboxes'; the first book I was ever bought by a partner and the only book that has ever disturbed my sleep. That crow held me tightly in the foaming belly of its beak; incarcerated by the dark and violent silence.

He still follows me around, when the Summer starts to turn; metamorphosis in the early light of Autumn. Sometimes he is bigger than life itself, holding the optical illusion of the world in his strong beak. When I first read Ted Hughes' incredible work on this haunting creature, I wondered if we all share the same crow, in different corners of our inner landscape. The morning I left Ireland, intending never to return again, my crow flew around and around and around of me, and refused to land, as the soft pink hue of morning softened his ebony coat. It made me think of roses as they wilt, and of how hauntingly beautiful decay can be, sometimes.

I moved to Scotland in my early twenties where I experienced cold the like of which I had only ever felt before when I'd been in the Atlantic Ocean in the bleakly textural, boreal month of February. Like Colmcille, the man behind the many beautiful yet unbearably dark myths of my hometown, I sailed to Alba with words unspoken, histories

buried under thick grey ice; in a fierce storm whilst the sea father Manannán breathed his mists onto a grey Irish Sea- all strata pronounced invisible, all ties severed; like a serpent star that has lost a limb.

I made friends that knew very little of the Troubles of my homeland, found a job that took up every bit of my time and all of my emotional energy, and gradually sailed even further away from any feeling that my experiences in my childhood in Ireland had shaped me, or who I was, to any extent whatsoever.

Most of my increasingly limited free time was spent exploring the islands of the West of my adopted homeland. I returned again and again to the Isle of Mull, gravitating to the North west of that wild Island, seeking, unconsciously, the solace and stillness that I had felt robbed of in my own Island's bloodied and war torn North-west. I stayed at Treshnish, just around the bay from Calgary in a safe yet dramatic nook of wilderness. The view, on a day free of the hauntingly beautiful haar, or sea fog, that creeps in from the farther-most reaches of the Atlantic, takes in the eerily remarkable Treshnish Isles. When night falls in that place, the world around of you is so black and still that it is as if the world is holding her breath, waiting for the silence to seep right into your very bones; waiting for tranquility. I spent a full week at Treshnish point on three different occasions - the most time I've spent in one place that wasn't where my possessions lived in my whole existence. I swam in all of the icy cold bodies of water around me and gathered ancient stones from the inner belly of a waterfall I have only ever found once, unable to find my way back to its clear waters no matter how hard I try.

I had finally run far enough away to be without borderlines, immune to imagined and violent boundaries; free from that ebony black crow that once flew around my insides. The stories that we tell ourselves are often the most untrue.

In truth the longer I lived away from Ireland the more I knew I needed to find my way back up from under the ice. To reclaim the words that had been buried under false bogland, to begin to smuggle that internal experience across to the lines of the outer world of history and personal experience; I needed to break the silence. I needed to go back across all of those borders and displace them one by one, to undo the fear, to write that new language; I needed to befriend that coal black crow. I needed to loosen the shackles of the black and white that hold those that have survived the red of civil war in a cell of false walls. Thick, tall and grey as those imagined walls are, they can be broken down in the opening of an eyelid; as fragile as the ice that coats the chrysalis in the first breath of Winter. In short, I needed to resurface from the ice and to reclaim my homeland for my own.

The day of the 30th of August 2013 was a Friday. In Scotland, many folk finish early on a Friday and I arrived home to my tall, grey tenement building overlooking the beautiful green meadows and the folkloric volcano of Arthur's Seat at 3.30 in the afternoon, as usual. My flatmate returned well after 5 that evening and found me, shaken and weeping like a small, lost child; still holding my mobile with my bike shoved against the wall in the dark, damp stairwell of our building.

I don't remember much after receiving the call to tell me Seamus Heaney had passed away in that tenement stairwell, many miles across the sea from my homeland. All I know is that I was weeping for much more than just that particular man, in spite of my deep respect for him and the personal experiences I shared with him.

Rather, I was crying for the years of unwanted transience, the silence unbroken, the paths I had spent my years too fearful to cross. The sorrow I experienced when Heaney passed shook me up from my insides out, like those ripples I remember hearing him speak of on that crackly set in my classroom decades earlier, and that I had subsequently spoken of with him in person on many occasions in the years that followed. His death and the void it created undid me and slowly took my hidden history and unraveled it from within, delicately.

Nothing was the same after that Friday afternoon. Fear held me tightly in the belly of its storm, and my identity, once so fiercely outlined, had faded at the edge; the lines of my map had blurred and I didn't have a compass. Grief is a country that has no definite borderlines and that recognises no single trajectory. It is a space that did not exist before your loss, and that will never disappear from your map, no matter how hard you rub at the charcoal lines. You are changed utterly, and your personal geography becomes yours and yours only, for that brief moment in time.

A week after he died, I read for the first time Heaney's essay to mark the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He reflects on how the Declaration's 30 Articles remain a profound force for historical good;

'I took it that Conscience would be a republic, a silent, solitary place where a person would find it hard to avoid self-awareness and self-examination; and this made me think of Orkney. I remembered the silence the first time I landed there. When I got off the small propeller plane and started walking across the grass to a little arrivals hut, I heard the cry of a curlew. And as soon as that image came to me, I was up and away, able to proceed.'

After my first reading of these words, I decided there and then to return to Ireland and, like that Orcadian curlew; to break the silence.

The first time I heard the cry of a curlew after reading those words was on Inch Island whilst walking with my Father through tall reeds under a beautiful winter sky filled with starlings. Less than a minute after the curlew broke that December silence, my Father told me, for the first time, that he had almost drowned when he was 18 after being caught up in reeds beside a swan's nest. By the time we had reached the water's edge, where our bodies met the outline of the world, where the waves met the land; another borderline had been taken off the map.

About the Author

Kerri ní Dochartaigh is a writer living in a very north-westerly part of Ireland, where the sky is grey and unbearably beautiful; where the land is folkloric and full of swansong. She read English Literature and Classics at Trinity College, Dublin. Her work has been published in some blogs and journals and she is currently shortlisted for the National Memory Day Poetry Prize. Her favourite bird is the curlew, her favourite Undertones' song is 'Get over you' and her favourite cup is mint green with a pale blue handle.