

# Queering the bull

## A common tale for Ireland and Spain

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This thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form  
for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.



***Queering the Bull* – PhD thesis by Inés Gregori Labarta, BA (Hons), MA****Abstract**

There are two elements to this thesis. The first, a novel in three parts, titled *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*, tells the story of saints, mystics, artists and scholars travelling back and forth between two of the most mysterious and isolated countries of Western Europe: Ireland and Spain. The journey begins in the dark times of the Early Middle Ages in Ireland, when a Spanish pilgrim is hunted by an evil warrior queen. With the aid of a magical cow, he will become Saint Chiaráin, the patron saint of cattle and mixed-races, the only one able to speak Cow and milk the bull. The story continues in the turbulent times of the Spanish Second Republic, where artists were gifted bullfighters, women could divorce, poets, such as Lorca, celebrated queerness, and fascism lurked everywhere, with its threat of the bloodiest civil war to ever happen in Spain. It finishes in the city of Neo Dublin: once prosperous, this Catholic theocracy established in the Iberian Peninsula has run out of food and energy, leaving it ill-prepared for survival on a planet of never ending rains. With Europe turned into swamp, this is a time that calls for miracle makers and those ready to do the unspeakable.

The novel is accompanied by a critical essay, also in three parts, that reflects on the creative process behind the novel. Each essay focuses on a particular aspect of the writing process – the gender and faith representations of my characters, the language used in telling the story, and the exploration of genre. These are all areas where I consciously decided to push boundaries and challenge binary concepts, looking for a more hybrid and fluid way to tell stories and communicate with my audience.

Above all, this PhD thesis looks to resist the exploration of cultural identity in terms of ‘difference’, but rather to reconceive different European national identities as underpinned by historic links – links which reach deep into the narrative and symbolic imagination. My project also constitutes a creative response to the current climate of hostility towards migration and the essentialism attached to identity by those resisting migration.



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**THE THREE LIVES OF SAINT  
CIARÁN**



*Some are transformed just once  
And live their whole lives after in that shape  
Others have a facility  
For changing themselves as they please.*

– Ted Hughes, 'Erisychton', *Tales from Ovid*



# THE BOOK OF COW<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Original manuscript found on *The Spanish Rover*, a passenger ship that arrived in Amsterdam and Joined States on the 382 AF. The ship is believed to have sailed from Neo Dublin right after the annihilation of the floating city. The *Book of Cow* is a hand-written Irish translation adapted from a Spanish translation (found as well on *The Spanish Rover*). The Spanish translation is an adaptation of the original *Book of Cow* manuscript, written in Old Irish in Clonmacnoise, Ireland, on the 6th BF. This new version of the *Book of Cow* was found wrapped in a piece of fabric and hidden along with other documents in a safe in the cockpit of *The Spanish Rover*. Among these was a Spanish book titled *The Bull's Betrothed*. The other documents were damaged by water and have proved illegible.



# I

## LOUGHMICHNOIS

**1** Hear the story of Queen Eanna's treason and how Saint Chiaráin extended AO's privilege from humans to cattle.

On the eve of Beltain, Eanna, daughter of the Tuatha Dé Dannan and queen of the Uí Néill and the Land of Connachta, discovered two outsiders trying to steal her cattle. She decided to punish them by offering them as a sacrifice to Góildeglass, the Water God who dwelled beneath the waters of Loughmichnois. The two thieves were a sister and a brother, and they were young and smelled of lavender and honey. Both had dark eyes and black curls like snail shells. Their skin was the texture of Persian silk, the colour of oats after they have dried. They had travelled from the Land of Everlasting Sun, Iberia, which was known in Éire as the Land of the Dead because a life lived in such brightness was unthinkable. They spoke Éire's tongue, but their words dragged with a rare tune.

Queen Eanna brought her court to the lakeshore: her women warriors of naked breasts and sinewy thighs, her druid Druggan whose hands were tinted with poisonous herbs, and her dogs smelling of rabbit's fear. They were all covered in gold and purple ritual paint, the colours of the Uí Néill clan.

Close to Loughmichnois' shores, mallards swam, alert.

Queen Eanna called her women warriors and told them:

— Tie the boy to the pole, facing south.

Bring me the girl, she is exotic and we can use her as a gift.

The siblings cried and screamed as they were dragged in front of the queen. Eanna pulled the girl's coarse hair to bring her close to her side.

— I will call you Leah.

You will be my present to Finnian and his monks in Cluain Ioraird,  
so they pray for my victory as High-Queen of Éire.

Your brother will be Chiaráin, Eanna said, naming the boy for the dark  
of his features.

- Please, let him go, the girl cried. Punish me but let him go.
- You will pay for your theft in service to the monks, Druggan told her. And you will wish then that your life had ended as quickly as your brother's.

At Queen Eanna's gesture, Druggan brought forth a ritual knife with a handle carved of cedar. He approached Chiaráin from behind and laid hands on his shivering body. The knife swooped down. The hamstringing was quick, the rendering of skin, muscle and tendon a gaping mouth on Chiaráin's legs. And he never walked again.

**2** Under Beltane's purple sky, the women warriors threw Chiaráin into Loughmichnois. His eyes were still open but his broken body was unable to move, and so he sank. A grey heron witnessed the sacrifice from the other side of the lake. Her wise eyes stared at Queen Eanna, sure that the Uí Néill's leader would regret her actions one day. Black-headed gulls cried, spiralling down in circles.

**3** Rain came to wash the skies while Chiaráin sank deeper and deeper into the depths of the lake. He passed by the curious reed. A mute swan with his orange beak full of insects and mud saw him sink. He went down, past a small colony of water rats diving. He went down.

Turning.

He floated through clouds of frogspawn with vestigial tadpoles worming inside their crystalline cages. He went down.

Down.

His body brushed the bottom of Loughmichnois, a bed of softened lime rocks covered in yellow algae and sea centipedes.

The lakebed trembled.

A silver flash.

And there he was, Goídeglass, the Water God, the Silver Snake of Loughmichnois. Goídeglass was hungry because he had to keep the island of Éire

afloat. Describing a god is forbidden under curses and the threat of hell, yet, a few words shall be risked. Goídeglass's eyes were deep and metallic, steel blue broken by rainbows. He had two shining horns over his head and a sharp snake face that smelled like the sorrow of reeds and newts. Gods are made from a different flesh; not clay but a mixture of silver and crystal grains. Goídeglass spiralled down, blowing lake water currents from his nostrils. The water that came from inside the god was so enchanted that if an invalid drank it, the unfortunate would be immediately healed. Water like this kept the fields fertile so they gave birth to apple trees, bog orchids, bird cherries, aspen trees, wild strawberries, dog roses, and elder trees.

The Water God came closer to sniff the boy: bread and olives from the Land of the Dead. Chiarán did not believe in Éire's gods, but in Goídeglass' eyes he saw the beginning of the universe, its end, and everything in between. He saw AO. The Silver Snake rushed away, like a fallen star ripping through the skies. Chiarán inhaled the trail of bubbles left behind until his lungs were drenched in black blood.

**4** Chiarán's body returned to the surface of Loughmichnois when the sun had set and everyone was gone. The rain-washed sky was a heavy blue colour scattered with ragged clouds. The scent of apple and mushrooms lingered in the air. Chiarán's body tangled in the reeds, which grew thickly at the shoreline. On the other side, next to the silent heron watching for her next prey, there was a cow.

**5** A red cow, young, still a heifer. A beautiful creature. Stop and contemplate her now. Forget Loughmichnois, and the black-headed gulls' screech, and the hoverflies' buzz. Forget the heron and its prey, the doomed baby rat. Forget the last rays of sun sliding over the water. Forget Chiarán, even if just for an instant, and look.

The heifer had almond eyes, the colour of brushed brass, full of desire for life. Eyelashes, thick and lush like a peacock's tail, covered them. Her muzzle was the pink of dew-drops on dog roses. Her velvet skin, vibrant mahogany. And those sensual hips, and her iron hooves, fit to climb the Sinai mountain faster than the wind. Her

undulating horns had the colour of the freshwater pearls from Loughmichnois, and they were ethereal yet prompt to call the blood and tear the flesh. This heifer, bestow your eyes upon her, she was blessed by the serenity of all that is sacred. This heifer had been called by something stronger than the bellow of the bull. She had heard Chiaráin's cry.

**6** The red cow approached the boy. She saw a human, broken, his body wrapped in blood and mud, blue skin ready to peel from his flesh, and dark mane writhing over his head like seaweed. She licked his face and felt something that reminded her of a beating heart. She pulled him to the shore with her horns and lay close to him all night, shielding him from the cold and from the evil spirits hiding behind the reeds.

**7** The next morning came with silver dust rain. Loughmichnois and the sky melted into each other and the sun did not dare to come out. Chiaráin's fingers moved under the rain. They were garnet and gelid at the tips. The heifer warmed them with honey-sweet saliva, awakening the blue blood that had frozen in his veins. He sensed her warmth and followed it, like a newborn calf guided by the only thing he knows: the rhythm of his mother's heart. Chiaráin's fingers, thin as the reeds, clutched at the smoothest flesh, the breast charged with life and the sacred cream. For the heifer had lived through a single spring and she had not known a bull yet, but despite this, AO called the white torrent to come down her milk ducts, to pour through her snowdrop-coloured teats. The heifer exhaled at the pleasure of nurturing her first calf. She gave the boy the blessed milk, like the cow gave milk to Noah and his family when they travelled the world imprisoned on a wooden ark. Warmth bathed Chiaráin, reminding him of the sun from his long-lost Land of the Dead.

And the heifer lowed:

— I wish for trees and their protective shadow,  
 like mother's tongue on my spine.  
 We shall go, before Queen Eanna's warriors follow,

like carrion crows.

Chiaráin understood what she had said, word by word.

— I cannot move, he cried. Please, take me to Cluain Ioraird.

And he spoke Cow.

## II

### CLUAIN IORAIRD

**8** Many days passed by. Skies came and went, bringing heavy clouds and winds that smelled of rivers, and black-headed gulls' screams. The red cow named herself Rua. She walked, and walked, and walked, carrying Chiaráin on her back. She passed by Cenél Fiachach, through oceans of grass and waving poplars. She turned east through Fir Tulach, under the canopy of chestnut woods. She crossed Cairbre, and Lagore's flatland and then veered north to Loegaire and then west until she smelled wood burning. She had arrived at Cluain Ioraird.

There were hovels made from stone and crowned with straw. Fires lit the dark fields. On top of a small hill, an oak grew. Under this tree, sat a man with white hair like clouds. His name was Finnian, wise like an old lynx, and founder of Cluain Ioraird. As soon as he saw the red heifer carrying the boy, he ran to meet them. His disciples followed. They came from many places: former druids, warriors, herders, princes, bards, peasants. They all craved knowledge, as starving eaglets crave mice.

Finnian took Chiaráin in his arms and carried him to the oak on the summit of the hill. There was a gap inside the large tree's trunk and that was where Finnian lived. He lowered Chiaráin to rest on his pallet. The other monks clustered behind their master. And they all washed Chiaráin with clear water from their holy well, taking turns to enter the oak. Afterwards, Finnian himself washed Rua and polished her endless horns and cleaned her hooves with his own hands. He had never seen such lustrous skin.

**9** Chiaráin woke up under Finnian's care. He was fed hot nettle soup.

— Where am I? That was the first thing he asked.

— Cluain Ioraird, Rua lowed.

She had squeezed inside the tree to keep him warm.

— Where is my sister? he asked the monks.

She is dark haired like me, and young with onyx eyes.

Where do you keep her?

Nobody answered.

— My sister is in Cluain Ioraird, I know it.

She was sent here by an evil queen.

Chiaráin tried to get up from the pallet, but Finnian made him lie again.

— She is here, in these grey fields.

Where do you have her?

The monks dressed in black ragged habits, and their skin was blueish white. They all had toad-eyes and hollow cheeks and hair shaved from the forehead to the crown. The odour of chalk and fish rose from the black cloth on their bodies.

— Where is she? Chiaráin cried.

— Look at their mouths, Rua said.

They cannot answer you.

The monks' lips were brown and tightly closed. And they were stitched, too. Because Cluain Ioraird monks had made a vow of silence and abstinence. They did not talk, or sing, or eat anything other than the thin nettle soup, which could be filtered through the small gaps between the flesh and the thread.

— Where is my sister? Tell me where she is, tell me.

Chiaráin grabbed Finnian but the monks circled around him like crows and held him down.

Chiaráin cried and screamed until Finnian decided to write the answer on a loose piece of parchment. He wrote: 'Gaillimh'. But Chiaráin did not know how to read. He went on screaming and crying.

— AO, why are you doing this?

Why do you keep testing me?

Do not leave me alone on this island.

— Ask them to teach you, Rua suggested.

And this is how Chiaráin became a servant for the monks in Cluain Ioraird

**10** Summer arrived. During Lughnasadh celebrations, men from the nearby village brought a pregnant cow and five newborn calves, in exchange for prayers and AO's blessing on their crops. The monks kept the animals tied to poles at the back of their settlement. Soon, the cries of calves asking for their mothers poisoned the air. The women came, too, the ones who wished to get pregnant, and they stayed four nights alone in Finnian's church. When they returned to their husbands, in time for harvest season, their wombs swelled with fruit.

Chiaráin could not walk, but he dragged his dead legs with his hands and elbows to look for roots in the fields. He collected nettles, dandelions and burdock. During the night, however, his body burned with nettle rash and his whimpers saddened Rua. After that, the heifer carried him on her back so his hands could reach for elderberries and apples. And, from then on, the boy was always seen riding his cow, like the Dagda and Tuatha Dé Dannan had done after stealing cattle from the Fir Bolg.

**11** Among the monks were three who were fine and virtuous, known as the three beauties of Cluain Ioraird. They were brother Cainnech, brother Laisrén and brother Ninnidh. Cainnech had been a bard, Laisrén a peasant and Ninnidh the son of an immortal warrior, Aonghus. They did not approve of Finnian allowing Chiaráin to join their community. One night, they were alone in the church, working on the Book of Cluain Ioraird, and wrote these words in the margins:

Cainnech: Chiaráin is dark. He is an enemy of Queen Eanna.

The rage of AO will fall upon us.

Laisrén: He did not come here looking for salvation,

but to follow his own selfish desires.

Ninnidh: He speaks Cow.

Cainnech: That is why Finnian took him in.

He saw the splendid skin of the red cow.

He has in mind doing a book with her.

Laisrén: We have to test Chiaráin.  
 See if he is fit to serve AO.

Ninnidh: He is weak like a leafless tree.  
 He will not survive the winter.

**12** When the leaves of the oak tree turned gold, Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh came to test Chiaráin. They led him on Rua, to the calves and the pregnant cow and made him understand he could free them and take them to the woods. Thus, Chiaráin sang the Cow lullabies Rua had taught him, to lure the animals into the green. The calves and the cow followed him. And when the boy and the three monks were under an ancient apple tree's shadow, Ninnidh took a semi-lunar knife and severed the calves' throats.

— Stop, Chiaráin begged.

But the monk did not listen and when he was finished he killed the cow too, opening her belly to take out the unborn calf. There was no ritual, no sacrifice, just grass soaking up the blood, and the smell of iron impregnating the monks' habits. Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh skinned the babies in front of Chiaráin, taking special care with the foetus, as its pure skin would be used to create the illustrated pages of the Book of Cluain Ioraird. Once they were finished, they left the bodies behind for the flies and the rooks.

— Murderers, Chiaráin wept that night.

Those calves cried for their mothers.

Now they will never see them.

Will I see my sister again?

— Those who pay the price of another's life,  
 in exchange for knowledge, shall die cursed.

Learn to read and write, Rua lowed, and you will find your sister.

Chiaráin swallowed the salty tears. That same night, he dragged himself to the church. Between its narrow walls, there was a fire. The monks crowded together inside, passing the Cluain Ioraird book between them. Chiaráin waited behind

Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh and he held it in his turn, looking through its parchment pages, which were written in Latin with black ink. The volume was still very thin. Chiaráin stared at the letters he could not yet understand and his heart was pressed sore.

**13** Samhain was close and with it came the white-silent winter. The monks washed the calfskins with fresh water, scraping the hairs off. A sulphurous smell of spoiled eggs remained behind. Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh agreed it was time to test Chiaráin again. They put the skins in stone vats outside the church, filled the vats with beer and quicklime, and ordered Chiaráin to stir them, day and night. The first time Chiaráin sank his fingers into the brown water, he felt as if he had touched a thousand nettles. Quicklime ate the flesh from his fingertips and left blisters like pearls. Even his tears were acid. He tried to use a branch to stir but in a few hours the water had eaten it. The boy whispered to the rain and the darkness:

— AO, if I do not serve the Cluain Ioraird brothers  
they will take me to the woods to die.  
AO, you took me from my land and my sister  
you saw me become a cripple, now.  
Yet I am still on your path so please  
help me.

And Rua heard his words, and she bent her head and used her horns to stir the poisonous waters. She spent eight days and eight nights stirring. The acid vapours of lime and beer burned Chiaráin's eyes and fogged his breath, but he never left Rua's back. When the three beauties of Cluain Ioraird returned, they were surprised to find that Chiaráin was still alive, that the cold had not killed him. After those days, Chiaráin's skin became thicker than oak bark, able to endure frost and rain.

**14** The monks washed the cattle skins with clean water again, and scraped their surfaces with the semi-lunar knife until a pink, elastic layer was the only thing that remained. After this, Chiaráin came to the church in the mornings too. While the monks collected roots in the fields, he stared at the book until the different letters started making sense. He stood with his back to the wall. The sun descended until it shone from behind the altar cross, which was carved in stone and placed in the middle of the church's only window. When the red glare blinded him, Chiaráin knew the night was about to come. One night he said to Rua:

- I never thought words could be trapped,  
yet here they are inside this parchment.  
Can knowledge be kept like this instead of dying with the masters?
- Knowledge can be stored, Rua answered.  
And it will be found by those who seek.
- When I learn to read, I will find my sister.  
And I will write down everything I have seen.
- You will do so, prophesied the cow.  
And your name shall be known in the four corners of Éire.

Chiaráin did not make sense of much that Rua said, but he curled himself against her and fell asleep breathing her warmth.

**15** After Imbolc, the winter retired and the monks dried the cow skins by stretching them on frames. Laisrén sent Chiaráin away to find white rounded pebbles. Chiaráin dragged his body through briars and thistle, until his tunic was torn and his forearms covered in blood. He found a vixen feeding on a grasshopper. The animal's golden eyes scanned Chiaráin and she licked her fangs. The boy covered his head thinking she wanted to hunt him. The vixen sniffed him, curious.

- Please, help me, Chiaráin whispered to the vixen, showing her the few white pebbles he had gathered.

And the vixen hunted around and she brought him as many pebbles as she could take in her mouth. She did this many times.

Chiaráin came back to the church with three hundred and thirty-three perfect pebbles. The three beauties of Cluain Ioraird were shocked by his determination, as they had thought he would slide down the mud, fall into the river and drown.

The monks used the pebbles to fold the skins and tie them to a wooden frame. Then Ninnidh boiled water and made Chiaráin ride Rua to scoop it over the skins to keep them wet. Chiaráin did so during forty days and nights and he did not sleep or eat.

When this was finished, Chiaráin was thin as a skeleton, but he did not think about apples, wild strawberries or nettle soup anymore. He came back to the church and spent day and night studying the book. This time Finnian himself assisted him and taught him Latin, showing him how to hold the goose feather to write.

**16** Beltane came again, and the skins dried and the monks scraped them with the semi-lunar knife until they were the purest white, softer than baby's breath. Chiaráin helped produce black ink by boiling old nails in the cauldron until the water turned dark. They folded the skins into pages, which they added to the Book of Cluain Ioraird. Then, Chiaráin started writing, and his first words were for Finnian. This is what they wrote to each other:

Chiaráin:       Where is my sister?

Finnian:        Where do you come from?

Chiaráin:       From the Land of the Everlasting Sun,  
                  Iberia,  
                  The Land of the Dead,  
                  as it is called by the druids in Éire.

Finnian:        And why did you come?

Chiaráin:       My sister and I heard from the three-horned bull,  
                  a god, that gives all knowledge to whoever sees him.  
                  So we crossed the warm sea and climbed mountains,  
                  crossed the Bán Sea and arrived here.

We learned Éire's tongue and exchanged stories for food.  
 Hunger drove us mad when we could not find any more villages,  
 Queen Eanna saw us trying to take her cattle and punished us.  
 She sent my sister to you, as a gift.  
 Where do you have her?

Finnian: Blessed be AO, I sent my best disciple, Bran, to the Land of the Dead.  
 He has not returned yet, perhaps AO called him already.  
 Queen Eanna is the bravest warrior in the four corners of Éire.  
 We pray for her victories every night,  
 and for the angels to sing her name.  
 But she did not gift us any girl.

Chiaráin: Where is my sister?  
 Do not lie to me, I know she was here.

Finnian: You are right. A girl came, but she was gone before you arrived.  
 She was not a gift, and she was taken by others.  
 We do not know what happened to her.

Chiaráin: Who took her? And where?

Finnian: You are my best scholar, Chiaráin.  
 You learned Latin as though you were Pádraig.  
 Why do you want to go? You are a monk now, AO's son.  
 Forget your previous life, and everything that came with it.  
 Forget the three-horned bull, I will give you knowledge.  
 Stay with us and write the Book of Cluain Ioraid.

Chiaráin: I crave knowledge and the stories told by silent ink.  
 Yet I need to find my sister first.

Finnian: You impose your will on AO's,  
 and that shall cost you many dear things.  
 Give us your cow, and we shall tell you where to go next.

Chiaráin: I cannot gift the cow, she is not mine, she is like my sister  
 and stays with me under her own will.

Finnian: Then stay the winter with us and help us survive it,

when Beltane's fires come again  
I will tell you where your sister went.

**17** On Samhain's eve, Finnian gave Chiaráin the black habit of the monks, and shaved his hair and stitched his lips together. Afterwards, Chiaráin prayed with the monks four times a day and was granted permission to write the Book of Cluain Ioraird with them. In the evenings, the boy left roots outside his hut so the vixen would have something to eat. During the dark nights, he talked with Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh. Here is what they scribbled on the margins:

Cainnech: All humans are equal under the eyes of AO.  
Laisrén: This world is an illusion.  
The real world awaits us beyond the bridge of death.  
Ninnidh: Beyond desire and gluttony and other animal impulses,  
we will reach AO's paradise.  
Chiaráin: Animals have also been made by AO.  
And they are not slaves of the mind.  
Ninnidh: Animals are prisoners of their impulses.  
Beasts were made to serve humans.  
Chiaráin: If we were like animals,  
we would listen to AO  
instead of being caged by our desires.

Finnian came across and saw what everyone had written. Instead of getting angry at them for not doing their work, he wrote this:

Finnian: Chiaráin, you speak like a wise man.

**18** After he won Finnian's approval, Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh hated Chiaráin and wished him dead more than ever. Winter that year came strong as a wild boar and it was as though Imbolc would never arrive. The weather was cold, hollow as an empty stomach. The monks in Cluain Ioraird starved. Wild deer ate all the roots. The monks cut the edges from the pages of their book, adding them to the cauldron to give the boiled water some flavour. They spent the dark days hunched around the small blue fires. They prayed to AO, holding stones warmed up by the embers.

**19** One night, the three beauties of Cluain Ioraird came out from their shelter to dig the ground, looking for something to boil. They saw Rua. She was licking the snow. As soon as she saw them, she felt fear's roots coiling up her legs. She smelled the iron on Ninnidh's semi-lunar knife. The calves' flesh still clung to the blade. She smelled the saliva filling their mouths and the foul odour of stomachs full of acid. She fled. Ice pellets fell from the dark sky. Tree branches were frozen, so that when the wind hit them, they broke like brittle bones. Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh chased Rua with blue fingers and the pale smile of Death.

Rua galloped past the willows. Her hooves splashed through the freezing slush. The monks followed her. Rua wanted to hide herself in the naked woods or in the darkness that pooled in the hollows. The frozen swamp broke under her weight and she sank into the icy waters. The monks approached. They grabbed Rua by her horns and dragged her out with hands like claws. They poked her with sticks and tied her muzzle with rope and took her back to Cluain Ioraird.

Snow continued to fall and the last fires were lost. The monks helped Cainnech and Ninnidh to hold the cow while Laisrén sharpened the semi-lunar knife. Finnian was nowhere to be seen and the monks cried from hunger. They all stamped on the ground and, under that sound, Laisrén raised his knife over Rua

— Stop, Chiaráin shouted at them.

Laisrén was so shocked by the sound of human words that he did as he was told.

Chiaráin came to him, dragging himself through the dirt and the snow. His lips were bleeding because he had ripped the stitches from his mouth to speak. He had broken the vow of silence. Everyone waited for AO's rage to fall upon him.

Chiaráin said to Rua:

— Come to me.

The animal tugged at the rope with renewed energy.

— Who are the demons you listen to? Chiaráin asked the monks.

Despite the hunger pangs of winter  
do not dare to kill.

Break the stitches from your mouths.

Eat the mud, the bark from trees, eat the snow.

Do not call yourselves the sons of AO.

You are murderers.

Queen Eanna sacrificed her cattle to the Water God  
but you are just butchers.

Saying this, he went for Laisrén's legs. AO gave Chiaráin strength and Laisrén fell into the snow. He let the rope go and Rua kicked and ran away.

— You want to survive? Chiaráin said.

You want a sacrifice so this winter ends?

Take me, I am young and a cripple,  
but I have strength.

Take me, eat my flesh, use my skin to make your book.

Ninnidh had been following the cow's escape with his eyes, but she was gone. He looked at Chiaráin.

— I did not steal the cow from you, Chiaráin said, swallowing blood.

She was never yours to begin with.

But you can eat me instead.

And Chiaráin took the semi-lunar knife from the mud and he sank it into his numb thigh and cut a lump of flesh.

— Eat my body, drink my blood.

Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh and the rest of the monks stared at Chiaráin. They were horrified, frozen by the cold that invaded their joints.

— Eat me, what are you scared of?  
 We kill each other in battles,  
 why do not we feed on each other too?  
 Eat me now, he cried.

And the starving monks grabbed the lump the boy offered and drank the blood, still warm, and many opened a few stitches so they could eat the flesh. They passed it round and fed on it, for they all thought that Chiaráin's sacrifice was their salvation.

Finnian came running down his oak. He tore his own habit to bandage Chiaráin's leg. His disciples surrounded him, trembling like trees under a storm. Their habits flapped in the wind. Black doves fallen from their nest.

Finnian howled a low tune, a prayer without words. And his monks all put their hands together and knelt facing the snow and the wind. Their lament resonated in their empty stomachs. Chiaráin was the only one who could chant some words, so he recited the prayer Rua had taught him:

— AO, come here,  
 bring your golden cattle  
 bring the sun, the moon, and all the beautiful things  
 you have created.  
 AO, come here  
 look at me, I am nothing but a drop  
 in a storm, please take me with your hands  
 cast your light in these dark corners  
 from the Bán sea to Loughmichnois.  
 AO, come here,  
 I shall give you my blood and flesh  
 I shall be the seed that feeds the world  
 I shall be a beam of light in your sun.

They prayed until dawn came, frost melted, and the fields turned to greyish blue.

**20** Next morning, Chiaráin went to Finnian and said:

— I must go.

Finnian wrote:       Where?

— To find my sister.

You promised me you would tell me at the end of winter.

Look at your oak. It has buds.

Finnian:       AO sent you here.

You are one of us now.

— Yes, AO brought me here.

But now AO is asking me to leave and find my sister.

Finnian:       If you leave now, you will die young.

Adventures are for warriors.

What we seek is knowledge and all the invisible things.

— I came from a faraway land.

I cannot stop now, so tell me.

Finnian:       I will make you a scholar.

You are my best student, and soon you will surpass us all.

— No. Tell me.

But Finnian refused to keep writing and left.

**21** That night, Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh tiptoed into Chiaráin's hut. They found the boy sleeping and left a piece of parchment next to his head. The word on it said: 'Gaillimh.' Later, still in the dark hours, Chiaráin read it and whispered for Rua. She emerged from the woods fast as the wind and he rode her out of Cluain Ioraird.

—Once you hear the path calling, go, Rua said, when they were in the woods.

Chiaráin looked back. He could not see Finnian's oak anymore. The pipeworts growing in the land whispered to him to carry on.

### III

## GAILLIMH

**22** Chiaráin and Rua travelled through Fir Tulach and Cenél Fiachach. They headed west to the fields of Delbna and Uí Maine. They passed cattle and herdswomen. They passed warriors in dirty armour. They passed hunting dogs. They travelled through Uí Fiachrach and Aidne. The skies were infinite. And one day, when they had left Corca Mruad far behind, they arrived at the mountains that loomed over the land, proud and fierce, holding up the blue. And beyond them, stretched the Bán Sea. Between the mountains and the water, a pile of houses huddled under the shadow of a fort. Chiaráin and Rua had arrived at Gaillimh.

**23** With its stone buildings and wooden bridges, Gaillimh was the largest town Chiaráin and Rua had ever seen. The boy and the cow brought with them the grey from the paths. They sniffed the air and smelled fish entrail soup and bitter beer. It was evening time. The clouds broke over the mountains and a golden light leaked across the houses, flooding them with an orange glow.

— This reminds me of home, Chiaráin said to Rua.  
 Sun and pale skies. I miss the warmth.  
 I wish I had come to Gaillimh when I sailed from Iberia.  
 I wish my sister was still with me.

Chiaráin stopped as many people as he could find.

— Have you seen my sister?  
 She is a young girl, dark like me.  
 — No, brother.  
 — No, brother.  
 I am sorry.

People saw his monk's clothes and gave him pieces of dried eel and a fish head, but nobody could answer his questions.

Nets hung from the windows of the houses along with fish cages covered in clams.

Rua scented dirty steel, mixed with purple and gold tribal paint.

— Look there, she lowed.

Chiaráin looked and saw one of Queen Eanna's soldiers lurking, like a salmon waiting to ambush herring. Rua carried Chiaráin out of the town and to the beach. The sea was calm and licked the pier and the fishing boats. Black columns of stone traced a path among the waves to show the boats how to avoid the treacherous rocks.

— I know where the dark girl is, a voice said behind them.

A small boy had followed them. He wore rags and the left side of his face was swollen, taking on the colour of ripened apples. His left eye was just a line, but the boy's teeth were white as the full moon that was taking shape in the sky.

— The dark girl was nice to me.

She gave me an apple.

She went to the Fir Bolg women of Inis Mór,  
the secret island of the Bán Sea.

Chiaráin listened to the boy eagerly and asked him who could take them there.

— People do not want to go.

They are scared of the Fir Bolg.

But I do not mind them.

I bring them eggs, and dried eel, and ground elder roots.

You can come along with me if you wish.

— Thank you, Chiaráin replied.

Are you sailing tonight with the full moon?

The boy nodded.

— What do you want in return?

— You are a monk, said the boy.

— I am a scholar.

— Pray for me.

— Do you want to be healed?

— No, the boy replied.

People feed me because of my face.

But I have heard that God can give you a beautiful afterlife,  
So good that you do not want to go back into another body anymore.

Pray, so I can get that.

Chiaráin made his prayer. Then he and Rua went to the boy's raft and sailed under the vigilant face of the full moon.

## IV

### INIS MÓR

**24** Rua stood on the boat, staring into the Bán Sea. The little boy rowed and Chiaráin clung to the stern, watching Gaillimh become smaller as it receded into the distance. The boat left a trail of waves behind, like a horse's tail. Sparkling mist covered the waters and the cold was as sharp as the semi-lunar knife. With the coming of a new day, gannets cut the air, plunging into the waters, screaming when they caught salmon between their claws. Steel-coloured dolphins accompanied the boat. The Bán Sea smelled of yellow seaweed gardens and fish scales.

The red sun shone over the three islands: Inis Mór, Inis Meadhoín and Inis Thiar. These islands were part of the carcass of Ekwos, the ancient Horse God who crashed into the Bán sea many eons ago. Once the boat reached the shore of Inis Mór, the Gaillimh boy jumped out. He brought with him a basket filled with eggs, bread and ground elder roots. He placed it on a rock shaped like a horse head and left with his boat.

**25** Chiaráin rode Rua to the rocky shore and waited.

He said to Rua:

— Hunger has slimmed your limbs.

Your red skin is like woodlands at the beginning of Autumn.

When we find my sister,

will I recognise her?

The coastline smelled of withered seaweed and broken seashells. Beyond the shore, hills of grass and limestone rocks rose to peaks. Seals rested on the beach, white sunlight caressing their plump, sensual bodies. Salt dried their skins to black and silver. They beat the sand with their fish tails to scare away the crabs. These Inis Mór seals were larger than humans, their mouths stained with hake blood. Rua walked down the beach, peeking at their fangs. The seals exchanged barks, their voices wrapped in the waves' noise.

**26** Rua took Chiaráin through a sterile land of rock and grey grass. There were no other humans to be seen.

— I smell cattle, Rua lowed.

When the clouds gulped down the last beam of sun, they arrived at a large rounded hut made from limestone rocks piled on top of each other and crowned with dried straw. One door faced south and one door faced north. Chiaráin slid off Rua to crawl inside, and the heifer followed. Outside, rain began to lick the straw on the roof. There was nothing in the hut but a small hole in the straw ceiling. A single ray of light shone through it, creating a white reflection on the ground.

— What is this? Chiaráin asked.

— AO, Rua said.

There were no trees on the island.

**27** Chiaráin lived in Inis Mór for many moons and in this time he did not find the Fir Bolg women the Gaillimh boy had told him about. When there was light outside, he emerged from the hut to seek his sister. When darkness fell upon the island, he returned to the hut with Rua and no one else. At night, the wind howled and brought rain and hail to the island. Sometimes, they heard chants coming from the hills.

Chiaráin survived by eating roots and grass. The Gaillimh boy returned every full moon to leave his gifts on the horse-rock. Apples. Eggs wrapped in sheepskin. Sometimes Chiaráin found small presents left on the doorstep of his hut. Juicy yellow flowers. A carved piece of wood, which he could use as a drinking bowl. Red berries. A sharp stone knife.

Rua took Chiaráin to the hills where the high grass tasted spicy. Limestone rocks hurt her tender hooves, but from there they could see the Bán Sea surrounding them. The waters reflected the mood of the sky.

On the western and eastern side of the island, two dark forts crouched amongst the rocks, Dún Dúchatair and Dún Aonghasa. Chiaráin approached them once. They were so tall he thought that only giants could have built them. Unnatural and ferocious, they smelled of rain and charred bones.

— Rua, we shall go back, Chiaráin whispered.

We are not allowed to be here.

Nothing good can wait beyond these doorless walls.

Ever after that moment, the black, mastodon-like walls of Dún Dúchatair and Dún Aonghasa appeared in Chiaráin's dreams, poisoning his sleep and filling it with screeches and sharp claws.

**28** One windy day, Chiaráin and Rua saw a woman high on the hill. She wore a bull mask and a dress made of black bull's hair. Her flesh was blue, covered by an ointment made from seal fat to protect her from the rain.

— That is my sister, Chiaráin screamed.

Rua ran towards her, as fast as the sea wind, but when they reached the top of the hill, she was gone. Her scent remained. Seal fat, myrrh and olives.

— Seeing her now and then not seeing her  
it is like having my soul cracked a second time.

I will die here if I have to

but I will meet her again, Chiaráin promised.

He stayed, looking around the hill until the night descended. He remained there for another three complete days, but no one appeared.

**29** Moons passed by and Chiaráin harvested the spicy high-grass with the stone knife, and dried it at night by pressing its leaves between two limestone rocks. He did this for several nights until he had a dry sheet similar to parchment. He used ashes to create black ink and produced his first words on his grass parchment. He wrote:

‘Inis Mór,  
graveyard of gods.’

And then he stopped.

**30** One night, Chiaráin slept in the hut, Rua's body shielding him from the icy currents of air and water. Outside, thunder made the ground tremble and crack open. The waves crashed on the shore, splitting the rocks. Rain forced itself into the hut through the straw and the spaces between the stones. A small, black waterfall poured through the hole that gave them AO's light during the daytime. The ground turned into mud and the straw roof dissolved. Lightning erased colour. The stench of burnt grass and algae filled the air. Drums pounded in the distance. Seagulls screamed. A powerful bellow followed. Rua stood up. She had smelled silver skin and lush white hair.

— The bull is close, Rua whispered.

She came out of the flooding hut and Chiaráin climbed up her back. Poisonous rain fell like knives, and wind and water blinded Chiaráin. Rua moved fast, untangling the grass around her legs. Chiaráin buried his face in the cow's warm fur:

— AO, please, do not let the black sky fall upon us,  
I am nothing but a drop in your furious rain-rage.  
Please show us the way.

Fleeing from the waters, they climbed the hill. The wind changed direction and thousands of cold hands, as if from dead children, propelled them up the slope. Clouds flew over them, black, purple and grey, screaming thunder. A bellow echoed. Clouds broke into rags, and there she was, the moon. The full moon, whole and white, like Balor's eye. Mist sucked at their skin and the sound of crashing waves grew louder, but the sea was nowhere to be seen.

**31** After the terrible storm, the land turned into black mud and the grass rotted. A fever came upon Chiaráin: his blood boiled, his skin turned grey and his eyelids purple.

— Rua, he begged, bring me to the shore.  
The Gaillimh boy is to come,  
he will help me.

Rua did as he said. Then she went back to the hills to look for roots and berries to feed Chiaráin, but the rain had murdered everything. The cow and the boy turned into sacks of sharp bones. Even the seals were gone. On the horizon, black clouds of smoke formed over the fishing town, and at night, they could see the glow of a thousand fires burning. War had come to the mainland. The Gaillimh boy did not come back to Inis Mór.

**32** Consumed by the fever, Chiaráin had a dream, and in his dream he was Rua, and this is what happened:

The air carried many scents: sweet almonds, liquid honey, sap melting, fresh leaves, ripening grass. And there he was. A bull, white like a frozen lake, with silver eyes, a thick neck and slender legs. Rua felt the heat in her hips and called to him. The bull had pearl-coloured horns and the water from the storm glittered like diamonds on his skin. A third horn grew between his eyes. He shook his head and approached Rua. She lifted her tail. He bellowed and scuffed the ground. They bucked and chased each others' tails, forming a white-red whirlwind until they were covered by the stars.

**33** Chiaráin slept for a full moon cycle and when he woke up these were his first words:

— I do not hear the waves.

A tanned woman with a dark curly mane was applying a blue ointment to his skin to help his body awaken after the fever. She was Leah, his long-lost sister, but he did not recognise her at first, for his mind was still weak from the fever.

— You are safe, she said.

— Where is Rua?

— She is here with us, Leah said, pointing at the cow, who sat behind Chiaráin to keep him warm.

Chiaráin looked at his sister again and finally he recognised her.

— AO,

frost is melting and seeds swell.  
 Beyond the snow, storm and the waves,  
 you are here.

And the two siblings entangled their arms like two trees growing together. And they laughed and cried and spoke in their foreign tongue.

- Where have you been, tell me.
- I knew you were alive, she replied.  
 But I had to run away from the black monks of Cluan Ioraird.  
 Their lips were stitched, but their free hands hurt.  
 I escaped with a tribe of roaming traders heading to Gaillimh,  
 and went into the Bán Sea.  
 I listened to the Fir Bolg's call,  
 I am one of them now.  
 I saw you arriving and I wanted you by my side  
 but the Fir Bolg did not trust you.  
 I told them our souls are one.  
 I told them we both are children of the Bull God.
- We shall leave.  
 We shall return home.
- Chiaráin, here we can find all we have always looked for.  
 The three-horned bull and all the mysteries.  
 Éire has already cast her cruel mark upon us  
 we will thrive in this land of darkness.

And that is how Chiaráin stayed in Inis Mór and called it home.

**34** Leah had brought Chiaráin to the doorless black fort in the east, Dún Dúchatair. A herd of bulls grazed inside. There were black bulls, brown bulls and grey bulls, larger than the animals from the mainland. They all had three horns. Their teeth were worn to stubs and their horns had infinite rings.

An old woman took care of the bulls. Nobody knew her real name, but she liked to be called Máthir Tarb. Her silver hair was braided and she wore a sealskin over her shoulders and a bull mask over her head. Her skin was also painted with the blue ointment. She moved among the herd, mumbling sweet-honey words, like a mother among her children. She fed the bulls tender buds, since the grass inside Dún Dúchatair was still green and vibrant. When she saw Chiaráin sitting on Rua, her face turned sour.

- You must go, she whispered, voice dry like bark.
- Who are you? Chiaráin asked.  
Where are the Fir Bolg?  
Why is there no one else on the island?
- Go, now, Máthir Tarb ordered.
- There were more Fir Bolg women, Leah said.  
The mad bull...
- Silence, siur, Máthir Tarb scolded her.  
You shall not reveal your sisters' secrets.  
The cripple is a man, he has no place in our island.  
He must leave.
- Máthir Tarb, there is just us now,  
and who will protect the sacred bulls?  
Chiaráin, listen, a poisonous rain came, two moons ago.  
It infested the grass and hurt the sacred beasts.  
A white bull, the eldest of all, lost his mind.  
Now he roams around the island, starving.  
He ate our sisters,  
and will hunt us, too.
- I heard the bull, Chiaráin said, and Rua smelled him, too.  
Máthir Tarb intervened:
- Siur, curses will fall upon you for revealing our secrets to a stranger.  
And Máthir Tarb said to Chiaráin:
- We, the Fir Bolg, followed the Bull God from Iberia.

We are god keepers.

We are Balor's water.

We are the seal's sisters.

We see beyond names.

We know the secrets of the bones and how to call a storm.

— I want to learn. Please, Chiaráin begged.

But Máthir Tarb hissed, turned back and disappeared within Dún Dúchathair's walls.

**35** Chiaráin stayed with the Fir Bolg. Leah gave him more blue ointment for his skin, and he noticed that with it he was free from the piercing bite of the rain.

Leah and Máthir Tarb gathered together inside the walls of Dún Dúchathair, every nightfall to eat, shivering each time they heard the distant bellow of the white bull. They fed on a white substance offered in wooden bowls.

— Máthir Tarb, where is the white bull? Chiaráin asked.

And later:

— Máthir Tarb, how do you make this blue ointment?

But Máthir Tarb refused to speak to Chiaráin. She only allowed Leah to share her bowl with him. It tasted like powder and cream and it was very sweet. Chiaráin found that by drinking this, his body was warm and full of energy for several days. He soon discovered that it was milk from the breast. All the Fir Bolg women, he was told, had full breasts, even the older ones, and they took turns to feed the community.

One day Chiaráin was given an empty bowl by Leah.

— Try, she said.

But Chiaráin's breasts were flat and his nipples were dry. He looked at his sister, whose hands were busy braiding a rope from the slender dry leaves of a bush that only grew inside Dún Dúchathair.

— You will be taught the blessing of milk soon, she promised.

**36** The blue ointment was scarce, so Chiaráin and Leah rode Rua down to the beach. The smoke clouds lurking over Gaillimh were darker. On the dunes, lay the carcass of a seal. Its ribs were cracked and lumps of dry meat hung from them. The sand around it was still stained with blood and bile.

— The white bull, Leah whispered,  
has been hunting again.

That night, when they were all eating, Leah said:

— Máthir Tarb, the seals are gone.  
The mad bull is feeding on them now.  
Without seals, there will be no blue ointment for us.  
We shall perish when the next storm comes.

— So be it, Máthir Tarb grunted.  
We will join our sisters at last.

— Chiaráin, Rua lowed, you can help them.

— Yes, the boy said. Sister, Máthir Tarb,  
I will find the white bull.  
I will talk to him, make him stop.

— Chiaráin, it is dangerous, Leah cried.  
The mad bull ate his keepers.  
He will be the end of you.

But Chiaráin did not listen, and that same night he went out from Dún Dúchatair riding on Rua and seeking the mad bull of Inis Mór.

**37** Chiaráin and Rua went down the beach. Under the full moon, the sands were silver and diamonds. The wind had brought ashes and the sour smell of war to Inis Mór shores, but the bull was nowhere to be seen.

They climbed the rocky hills, covered in dead grass and abandoned rabbit warrens. They circled the ponds formed by the rain. The moon reflected on the water, but the bull was nowhere to be seen.

— Let's go to the cliffs now, Chiaráin suggested.

To the ruined fort of Dún Aonghasa.

And so, there they headed, to the second Fir Bolg fort, larger than Dún Dúchatair and empty since the Fir Bolg race had been cursed and slaughtered by the white bull.

**38** They found the creature inside, licking the rocks as he tried to find some fresh grass inside Dún Aonghasa. His three horns shone like crescent moons. His muzzle was covered with fresh rabbit blood and he had pieces of flesh trapped between his teeth. As soon as the bull caught the scent of Rua, he raised his head. His eyes were white as the moon, and blind, burned by the malignant rain. He headed towards the smell.

— Cow, cow, cow, cow, he grunted.

Then he sniffed the air with his gigantic nostrils.

— Flesh, flesh, flesh, he bellowed.

The white bull prepared to charge, he waved his tail, and his front hoof scratched the ground. The beast thundered towards Chiaráin, faster than the storm winds of Inis Mór.

— Please, stop, Chiaráin cried, please, do not eat us.

The bull halted in mid run.

— Who are you, you talking flesh? he asked.

I am ravenous.

— I am Chiaráin, the boy said.

I know you are hungry, but you have to stop.

You are eating everything on this island.

— I am hungry, the bull said, I am hungry, and it hurts.

— What does? Chiaráin asked. Tell me, and I shall heal you.

— My entrails burn, burn, burn, burn.

My insides are an ocean of fire.

Flesh will calm them down.

The bull bellowed and charged again. Rua flung herself to the side to avoid his sharp horns.

- You are poisoned by the rains, I was, too.  
Listen, I can save you, Chiaráin insisted.
- He is beyond cure, Rua whispered to him.  
His insides were burnt by the poisonous rain.  
His mind is already gone.
- It hurts, it hurts, the white bull bellowed.  
Where are you, you talking flesh?

He sniffed the air again to follow their trace.

- I can help you take the pain away, Chiaráin promised.
- No, no, no, no.
- Let's jump over the cliff together, Chiaráin suggested.  
AO, with the ocean's water, will cleanse us both.

And saying this, Chiaráin went from Rua's back to the stoned ground. He dragged his body with his arms and came to the white bull. The creature's breath was like water boiling and reeked of rotten flesh. Chiaráin's fingers nudged the bull's iron hooves, and the animal felt the presence of AO so he lowered his legs. The boy climbed up, holding onto locks of white hair, until he was perched on the bull's back, arms around the beast's thick neck, safe from his deadly horns.

- Go now, Chiaráin commanded, let's meet the waves.

And under the dark skies, they went. Chiaráin did not own the bull like Gilgamesh had owned Gugalanna, like Hathor had owned Apis, like Minos had owned the Minotaur, like Moses had owned the Golden Calf. Instead of owning the bull, Chiaráin was one with him, while both of them sank into Balor's eye.

**39** Chiaráin and the white bull hit the black waters of Balor's realm. AO protected them, so they did not drown. Currents kept them afloat and safe from the hidden rocks at the base of the cliffs. Chiaráin bobbed up and down with the sea-swell. And he saw that the bottom of the ocean was covered with the skulls and bones of humans and

cattle. He swam up to the surface again, always holding the bull's horns. A falcon took flight from the cliffs. There was a flat rock, and next to it, a crack opened, giving way to a cave. The white bull climbed the rock and collapsed there. His head crashed against the rock and his central horn broke and wobbled from his forehead.

The bull grunted:

— The pain is here, but I remember who I am, now,  
 drink from my milk,  
 yours is the strength.

And Chiaráin was dismayed and weak but he did not dare to disobey the bull, so his fingers tapped the creature's stomach until he found his small teats, hidden between the soft fur and his huge testicles. Chiaráin tugged on them until a few drops of grey liquid dripped into his mouth. It tasted sour but energised Chiaráin's spirit.

And the white bull said:

— Dry darkness, away from the waves.  
 Take my horn and stab me between the eyes.

Chiaráin was terrified when he heard these words, but, again, he did not dare to disobey. The blood dripping from the bull's broken horn flowed down to the sea. The boy grabbed the horn and pulled until there was a crack. He held the horn between the bull's eyes.

The creature bellowed:

— Do it,  
 death is calm  
 immortality a curse.

The boy sank the horn in the bull's thick skin. There was a golden spark, and that is how Chiaráin killed his first god.

**40** Leah's heart ached for Chiaráin, so she went to look for him. When she found Rua peering down the cliff, she did not despair but went to the cow carrying the rope she had braided for many moons and told her:

— So Chiaráin fell down, but I know he is alive.

Siur, let me tie this rope to your strong neck  
 I will go down and save him  
 and you will pull us both up and back to life.

Leah tied one end of her rope to the cow's neck and the other to her waist. She lowered herself down the cliffs, stepping on the overhanging rocks and reaching for them with her hands. For Leah was fast as a gannet and knew Inis Mór's cliffs well. She found her brother curled next to the bull's corpse, keeping warm from the icy waves, holding the broken horn tight between his hands. Leah took him on her back and Rua pulled them both back up the cliff. The cracks smelled so intensely of seagull droppings that Chiaráin felt acid form in his throat and was about to faint but Rua pulled strongly and brought the siblings back before sunrise. The strength of the red cow was such that, from that day onwards, she had a place in the Fir Bolg's legends, next to the Primal Ox and the Bull God.

**41** Máthir Tarb fed Chiaráin fermented liquor made of seaweed, that helped him recover. When she saw the horn in his hand, she knelt down and said:

— Siur, you have become horned now.  
 You have drunk the bull's milk.  
 Blessed you are by the Primal Ox.  
 Yours shall be the secrets hidden between the doubles  
 of Life and Death, Light and Dark, Woman and Man  
 and the white torrent of life.

The boy did not say anything and stayed quiet for several days, as he was tired and weak after riding the bull. But from that moment on, his body acquired strength and dark hair grew on his face, arms and legs, for Chiaráin became both female and male, and held the power of the Primal Ox.

**42** Chiaráin collected the high-grass growing inside the fort and turned it into parchment. He made pens from seagulls' lost feathers and ink from ashes. Then he went to Máthir Tarb and said:

- I want to know how you create the blue ointment that fights the rain.
- I want to know the secret words to enrage the seas and wake Balor.
- I want to know where the three-horned bulls come from.

Máthir Tarb did not want to reveal the Fir Bolg sacred mysteries to a stranger. Yet, Chiaráin had saved them all from the white bull, and he had drunk the creature's milk.

- Leah will show you, she muttered.
- The three-horned bulls are our ancient herd  
from the lands of Mesopotamia and Iberia  
we brought them with us, to Éire.

And then, Chiaráin looked at Leah. Her sister's body was changing: her breasts were larger and her belly was growing. He asked Máthir Tarb.

- We need no man, the old woman answered.
- Our bodies breed our daughters.
- The Womb unfolds like a flower, then a fruit,  
like the Primal Ox created the world from darkness  
and Mary offered us her light by creating Jesus.

Chiaráin listened to all this and then he wrote it down. Máthir Tarb complained:

- Siur, our secrets are not to be kept in parchment  
so despicable eyes can steal them.

But Chiaráin replied:

- This book will keep your wisdom safe for generations  
shall some evil arrive to this lost island's shore.
- The master can die, but Balor and AO are immortal in these pages.

Máthir Tarb did not have anything to say to this, and she and Leah helped Chiaráin produce more high-grass parchment. He wrote the tales of the Bull God on

them, and the stories of Dún Dúchatair and Dún Aonghasa too, and these scrolls survived for millennia before the sea destroyed them.

**43** With the white bull gone, seals returned to the beach. When the old ones died, Leah took Chiaráin and Rua to cremate the large, grey bodies. Before offering them to the flames, the girl used a stone knife to cut the skin and take the thick layer of fat that lay over the flesh. Aided by Chiaráin, she spent the whole day collecting the golden substance. They brought the seals' fat to Dún Dúchathair in wooden bowls, and there they boiled it for fifty days and fifty nights until it became hard and black in colour. While the seal fat boiled, Leah walked around the fort's walls collecting young leaves from the woad plant. She cut them into small pieces with the stone knife and left them to dry until they were the consistency of wood. After this, she added water every day until the woad fermented. In the cauldron, she mixed it with bull's urine and the fat from the seals. She stirred and stirred. The smell made Chiaráin sick for the first days. It reeked of raw bowels and rotten leaves and only the freezing winds from the sea weakened the stink.

After one hundred days, an ointment formed: bright blue in colour, oily and spicy. Leah gave it to Chiaráin to cover his naked body so he was immune to the rain. Chiaráin used it on Rua too, and her red hair sparkled in gold and blue.

**44** The time came for Leah to give birth. A storm raged that night, and the winds carried the uproar of the war in Gaillimh to Inis Mór's shores.

Máthir Tarb took Chiaráin to the side and said:

- Look across the waves  
the mainland is lit by a thousand fires.  
Like stags, the clan leaders fight for Éire's throne.  
Now, tell me,  
did you see the future in the bull's entrails?
- I saw a golden spark, Chiaráin answered.

Nothing else.

— Gold is one of the colours of the Uí Néill.

Queen Eanna will defeat her cousin Diarmait.

— Let the world spin in its madness, Chiaráin said, scared at the sound of Eanna's name.

This island shall outlive them all.

Back inside the fort, Chiaráin saw his sister in great suffering: red and brown waters fountained between her legs, and she had a feverish face. He called Rua, who allowed Leah to lie against her body. The heifer licked the sweat off Leah's forehead to keep her fresh. The air was ripe with fish and salt. Máthir Tarb pressed Leah's belly and guided Chiaráin's hands so he could ease the newborn into the world. A breeze of fresh cut grass wafted between the walls when the baby girl emerged. Her skin was blue and purple, covered in a sweet molasses. Chiaráin held her tight and her tiny pink lips attached to his nipple. The baby sucked and a thin stream of milk spurted into her mouth.

And that is how Chiaráin learned the ways of the womb.

**45** While Leah was sleeping with the newborn baby on her chest, Máthir Tarb whispered to Chiaráin:

— Take the placenta to the shores and drop it into the sea

Balor shall be honoured after an auspicious birth.

Chiaráin did as he was ordered, and taking the dark maroon placenta, he rode Rua from the hills to the sea, not knowing that by doing so he was bringing doom to the Fir Bolg.

**46** Queen Eanna was greedy. She wanted to destroy her cousin Diarmait but she had heard of the three-horned bulls of Inis Mór and wanted them in her herd too. So, when the sun was at its highest point in the grey skies, she took a boat with twelve of her warriors and they rowed to the island faster than any storm.

When they arrived on the shore, they saw Chiaráin and Rua, and they chased them like hunters chasing deer, and that is how they found the entrance to Dún Dúchathair, where Druggan the druid had told them the bulls were kept. Once inside, the soldiers set fire to the high-grass, to frighten the bulls. Máthir Tarb woke to the smell of blood, fire and cattle's grief. When she emerged to protect her herd, Queen Eanna laughed at her, eyes tainted with the ocean's rage.

— Look at this monster, she said to her soldiers.

The Fir Bolg are not human, but more like animals.

They are of no use to me, hunt them if you find it amusing.

They wear seal's skins, we shall see how quick they are on the ground.

And Chiaráin took his sister and the baby, and the three of them hid with Rua between the walls. Chiaráin had in his hands the white bull's horn, but his fear of Eanna was too strong and he did not dare to use it.

Máthir Tarb said to the queen:

— Eanna, the rage of the Bull God will fall upon you and your kingdom.

Make dirty what is sacred and you shall regret it during many lives.

But Eanna answered:

— You, the Fir Bolg, come from the Fomorians, an extinct race.

I am daughter of the Tuatha Dé Dannan,

and do not care about your prophecies.

And with a single blow she cut off Máthir Tarb's head with her axe, while her soldiers captured the bulls with ropes and dragged them to the Queen's boat.

Leah cried to see her sister slaughtered, she let out a shriek and came out from the walls, with the baby tied to her chest. With her stone knife, she began cutting the ropes that held some of the bulls. The animals ran away, violent with fear and fury, and charged the soldiers. A few fell from the cliffs and the waves gulped down their screams. When Queen Eanna saw Leah helping the bulls, she recognised her from her sacrifice at Loughmichnois.

— I let you live once,

but this time I will send you to the Tech Duinn and the Otherworld.

And saying this, the Queen buried her axe in Leah's face. The girl toppled to the ground like a falling tree. Queen Eanna kicked the baby's body, stamped on it and shouted:

— Goildeglass, the Water God,  
has promised me Éire  
and everything that dwells between the water and the sky.

And the soldiers took the bulls that were left and brought them to the boat and they all came back to Gaillimh to keep on fighting the war.

**47** Chiaráin crawled across the blood-drenched fields to his sister's body. Máthir Tarb lay dead on the burnt grass, beside Eanna's soldiers. Bones protruded from blue painted flesh, glittering entrails and cracked limbs spilled across the ground. Leah's skin had already hardened to stone. There was white bone and red blood where her face had once been. The baby was cold as the rocks under the sea. Chiaráin said:

— AO,  
I will not stop  
breathing  
until Queen Eanna's bones  
are regurgitated by carrion crows.

And he took Leah's clothes and dressed in them. He threw her body and the baby's over the cliffs to Balor, and did not speak a word for one hundred and four days.

**48** Chiaráin and Rua built a raft out of the pieces of wood that had been washed up on the island's shores. When they pushed their raft into the waves, only the seals watched them sail away. Chiaráin took nothing from the island, but the white bull's horn. On the top of the mountains, a shadow observed their departure. Nobody knows if any of the Fir Bolg women survived, but none have been seen in Inis Mór since that grim day.

## V

## HARE ISLAND

**49** At Gaillimh, there was fire, screams and the thunder-sound of blades clashing together. Arrows cut the air faster than the flight of terns. The place stank of dead flesh and anguish. Gold and purple banners from the Uí Néill washed over the waters. Queen Eanna fought her cousin Diarmait to decide who would hold control over the once prosperous town of Gaillimh.

Chiaráin's raft drifted on the currents to a small island in the bay. It was called Hare Island among the people of Gaillimh because thousands of hares leapt around the sterile rocks. They were exceptional swimmers and fed on fresh fish. Chiaráin guided Rua to a side of the island protected by a rock wall, on top of which grew a single elder tree. He sat next to her in silence. The screams coming from Gaillimh were like waves crashing against the cliffs of Inis Mór. Chiaráin sat for so long that his dark hair grew to cover all of him and honeysuckle tangled around his limbs.

On the thirty-second day, people began to come to Hare Island. First it was the young orphans escaping from the war. They jumped into the waters and, like the hares, they arrived swimming. Next came the fishermen who had lost their boats, because the port was in flames. Then the traders whose markets had been destroyed. Then the beggars and the scholars who could not find a scrap to put in their mouths. They were all starving, but the first thing they saw in Hare Island was not the flock of hares but Chiaráin sitting at the base of the rock. He was dressed in his cow-hair tunic and he was as fair as the Virgin Mary. By his side, everyone felt safe and protected. The elder tree growing above him flowered and gave white berries. Rua guarded Chiaráin and she licked his hands and feet everyday to keep them in the warmth of life.

**50** People fell ill because they did not have fresh water and the berries were not enough to keep them nourished. They did not dare to hunt the hares because they thought they had been blessed by the saint. Instead, on Imbolc, the sixty-seventh day, a woman suggested they took milk from the saint's cow.

This woman approached Rua. She was a fishmonger but she knew how to milk. However, before her hands could grab the red cow's teats, the animal spoke, and this time AO made everyone understand what she said:

- Woman, you shall not take milk that has not been gifted.  
Like your hands enslave and slaughter cattle,  
mankind enslaves and slaughters you and your sisters.  
You are kept for breeding,  
your fruit is abused, they eat everything you keep under your skin.  
Woman, praise the milk and you shall be respected.  
Learn the secrets of white and no man will dare to hunt you again.

Everyone knelt when they heard the cow speak. And some of them laughed, and others cried, and the wise ones prayed to AO. The fishmonger woman brought a feverish baby to Chiaráin.

- Please, forgive me, she said.  
Forgive me for offending your sacred cow.  
But I need to feed my daughter, she implored.  
I need her to live, to see the coming of spring.

And Chiaráin extended his arms and he took the sick little girl and gave her to suckle. And this time, a white torrent flowed from his breast, and the child was healed. And Chiaráin fed the child mother's too, and everyone in Hare Island. Because they had tasted the saint's milk, they were free from disease and acquired the strength of young cattle. And when some of the women went into labour, Chiaráin assisted them and brought healthy babies to their breasts. Children used white stones from the sea to build a circle around Chiaráin, and everyone on the island worshipped him and his cow. Since then, every Imbolc, Éire's people pour milk into the ground to thank the generosity of Saint Chiaráin.

**51** On the ninety-first day, Queen Eanna finally managed to break through Diarmait's defences. She set fire to Diarmait's camp and hunted his soldiers. Diarmait himself was wounded but ran to the sea. Swimming across the dark waters, salt burning his wounds, the warrior thought his end had come. But then, he remembered the stories about the hermit from Hare Island, who was said to have saved everyone from the horrors of the fight and had a beautiful red cow by his side. And so Diarmait swam to Hare island.

People panicked when they saw him arrive, body covered in blood and sword still tied to his waist. He told them:

— Fear not, sons and daughters of Gaillimh.

I came to worship your hermit.

So they took him to Chiaráin.

As soon as the warrior saw him, he fell to his knees.

— I visited Finnian in Cluain Ioraird

and prayed in the Hill of Tara

but I have never cast my eyes

on a holy figure before.

You are fair like the Morrigan,

mysterious like the Water God of Loughmichnois,

in your black eyes there is the compassion of Christ.

For Diarmait was feverish, and infatuated by Chiaráin in the same way he had been infatuated by women. In truth, and aside from his black beard, Chiaráin was exactly like his sister Leah, hair long like the branches of a willow tree.

The warrior said:

— My name is Diarmait, from the house of the Uí Néill,  
grand-son of Niall Noígíallach.

I have come to ask you

save Gaillimh from Queen Eanna.

And after saying this he collapsed, as his body was closer to death than life. But Chiaráin had heard about the Queen, so he raised his eyes and he spoke for the first time in one hundred and four days.

— I shall be Eanna’s doom, he said.

**52** The people from Gaillimh witnessed the encounter between Diarmait and Chiaráin. They saw Chiaráin treating the warrior’s wounds, nursing him during the fever, and saving his flesh from decay. Thus, many of them swam back to town and spread the news: the hermit of Hare Island had healed Diarmait. The young Uí Néill was still alive and hadn’t perished with his troops. At the same time, Cabhan, one of Queen Eanna’s warriors, saw a dead falcon falling out of the sky, as if struck by lightning, and thought of it as a bad omen.

As soon as Diarmait could stand on his feet again, Chiaráin prayed to AO. He whispered Balor’s secret words, the ones Leah and Máthir Tarb had taught him, to invoke a storm. A silver whirl-wind of clouds appeared in the sky and the full moon shone briefly before the rain arrived, mixed with hail. Lightning blinded Queen Eanna and her army, whilst darkness provided shelter for Diarmait, who devised a surprise attack.

The three-horned bulls, that Eanna kept tied at her camp, went wild with fury. They growled, bellowed and rubbed their heads against the ground. Lightning struck the camp three times in a row and soon flames shot up everywhere. Fire ate at the ropes that held the bulls, set their horns burning and seared the animals’ eyes white. The bulls tore themselves free and stampeded through the camp, charging and destroying everything they found. That night, they killed many of Queen Eanna’s warriors.

At the same time, Diarmait battled like never before among the ruined buildings of Gaillimh. He used the smoke as a shield, and with his own sword, he defeated many other warriors before the moon had reached its highest point in the sky.

— Cursed be the storm and lightning, Queen Eanna said.

I see my warriors turned into meat.

They will feed the fields.

Others run to join Diarmait

saying the gods are with him tonight.

Diarmait, she yelled, come, let us meet.

I want to see your blade streak.

She found him by an oak and they fought under the full red moon. Diarmait made a deep cut on Eanna's shoulder and she buried her axe on his thigh. The two of them received many terrible wounds but never fell down, not even once. When Queen Eanna was about to knock Diarmait's head from his shoulders with her axe, a three-horned bull charged her from behind. The burning horns pierced the Queen's flesh, but she reached back blindly to slash at the bull's neck with her blade. The bull sent her flying through the rain, and she fell to the ground with her armour on fire. She rolled deep into the mud to get rid of the flames, and survived to limp back to her camp.

The mad bulls chased and murdered warriors all night, until they stampeded down to the sea. By sunrise, Queen Eanna's banners were scorched and she had been expelled from Gaillimh. Bull corpses carpeted the shores.

**53** Diarmait celebrated his victory in Gaillimh for three days and three nights. He came to see Chiaráin, gifting him with a purple tunic made from the smoothest sheepskin, and a chalice of gold and rubies, but Chiaráin refused these.

— I do not wish for goods and treasures, he said.

And Diarmait was amazed at the generosity of Chiaráin, and because of this, he admired him more.

**54** After her first defeat, Queen Eanna was furious. Despite the ulcerated wounds in her back, she rode her horse to the four corners of the island to talk to Éire's other clans and convince them to join her in a final battle against Diarmait. She demanded that it take place at Loughmichnois.

Queen's Eanna's followers said:

— King Diarmait is strong like a wild boar and fast like a gannet.

And he is handsome like the golden sun during its rise.

But what can he do against an army of thousands?

He shall have the brief life of a dun butterfly.

But Diarmait's followers replied:

- Chiaráin is by his side, like in the fires' night of Gaillimh.  
AO has already chosen Éire's new High-King.

And Diarmait came to Chiaráin at Hare Island one more time and begged him:

- Before AO requires you take your place by his side up in Heaven,  
come with me and pray for this last battle.

Chiaráin looked at the young warrior, then at Rua, and he said:

- I remember the three-horned bull I met at the cliffs of Inis Mór.  
I saw a glimpse of gold in his blood  
the same colour as the gold in Diarmait's hair.
- Diarmait may be called to be a king, Rua agreed.  
There is a regal brightness in his eyes.

And so Chiaráin took Diarmait's sword and kissed it with his white lips.

## VI

# LOUGHMICHNOIS

**55** Chiaráin left Hare Island and rode Rua in the footsteps of Diarmait and his army. They passed Uí Fiachrach Aidne, Uí Maine, Delbna, Cenél Fiachach, Tethba and Cairbre before arriving on the shores of Loughmichnois. Diarmait positioned his troops on the south side of the lake while he waited for Queen Eanna to arrive. The young warrior was nervous. Queen Eanna's army was several times larger than his, and the battle would take place in her land. Diarmait's druid, Jarlath, came to him at sunset and said:

- I will assure your victory tomorrow on Beltane.  
I shall crown you as a king tonight in the Dagda's presence.  
Let Him see you are not afraid of fulfilling your destiny.

Jarlath made a crown from mistletoe and oak leaves and he sang an incantation whilst he set it on Diarmait's head. He lit a branch from an elder tree and spread the violet smoke around the golden warrior.

- Let's sacrifice five cows to please the Dagda, the druid said.

The soldiers brought the weeping black cows. Their udders blossomed with purple ulcers, green flies stuck to their eyes and to the gaping wounds where their horns had been severed.

Jarlath said:

- Look Diarmait, this is a present from Finnian,  
the saint from Cluain Ioraird.  
These cows were meant to feed his entire monastery.  
Now he and his monks keep abstinence  
while they pray for your crowning at Tara.
- Leave them be, Chiaráin commanded the druid.  
Murder would only repulse AO.  
Diarmait will be the next High-King.
- What do you know of the Dagda, our gods and rituals?  
You have dark skin, you were not born in these lands.

- What do you know of Finnian and the Book of Cluain Ioraird?  
 And the secrets of the Fir Bolg?  
 Do you know the magic hares of Gaillimh?  
 Do you speak Cow?

And saying this, Chiaráin grabbed the burning stick and tossed it to the ground where it set fire to a bird-cherry bush.

- Look, that is the only God you will find, Chiaráin said.  
 There are no others dwelling in the skies or under the ground.  
 There are no ears eager to listen to your words  
 or hands ready to accomplish what you ask for.  
 Take action, fight, make the sword dirty.  
 That is how Diarmait will be High-King.  
 Now go and find yourself a weapon for tomorrow's battle  
 or hide with the cowards when the sun goes down.  
 Do not kill what is innocent  
 and use AO's name to clean your hands.

Jarlath was white as the sky and he smelled of damp moss and burned fabric.  
 Diarmait said to his druid:

- Listen to what Chiaráin says.  
 Do as he commands.  
 Chiaráin gave me Gaillimh.  
 Under the dark skies of Éire,  
 there has never been a fairer soul.

The black cows were freed and Rua licked their wounds. Chiaráin cleaned their ulcers with fresh water and elderberry sap. Afterwards, he ordered that they should be treated as though they were noble women. They grazed all over the campsite but no one dared to touch them for they had become sacred.

**56** Night fell and Chiaráin went to the woods. Diarmait saw this and came after him. He found the hermit sitting on the roots of an oak, with Rua by his side.

Chiaráin said:

- Fear not Diarmait.  
 Eanna is a worthy opponent but  
 you do not need the Dagda.  
 I was the one who promised you Tara.
- You spoke wise words, Diarmait answered.  
 Your ways are mysterious, but I do not forget  
 that I owe you my life  
 and because of you I won Gaillimh.  
 Now, however, we are at Loughmichnois.  
 And in the four corners of Éire, it is known  
 Queen Eanna is the favourite of Goídeglass.  
 The Water God will assure her victory.

But Chiaráin added:

- Fear not, Diarmait.  
 You will be crowned in Tara.

That night Chiaráin was beautiful like an angel from paradise, with lush dark curls. His scent was that of a young heifer to the nostrils of the bull.

And Diarmait said:

- Kingship begins with a ritual.  
 A high-priestess is always the one  
 who receives a vision of the next High-King  
 and she takes the role of the land  
 before the High-King is crowned.  
 She is the goddess that blesses him  
 to assure his reign shall be fruitful.

Diarmait grabbed Chiaráin's hands, and he found they were light as birds, with bones of air and glass. And he continued:

- I wished to worship you in solitude  
 since the first time I cast my eyes on your form.  
 Your features have not been eroded yet

by the winds and the rain.

Your skin is warmed by AO's sun

and you have the sweet gaze of a cow.

— I saw gold in the bull god's blood, Chiaráin replied.

You are called for this.

And Diarmait said:

— Be the land for me.

I need your blessings.

And the hermit showed Diarmait the blue ointment he had taken from the Fir Bolg. He covered his hands with it, stroking it over Diarmait's body, strong and nimble like a young bull. And on Beltane's eve, Chiaráin knew him.

**57** Before the first light of the morning, Chiaráin crawled back to Rua, who was eating burdock outside Diarmait's tent.

— I have felt warmth for the first time, he confessed,  
since my chest turned into a frosted dead tree.

Diarmait's hands have brought the sun to my soul.

When he took me, I felt blessed by the Bull God,  
the Horned God that has come to survive the longest night.

I understood why all things are connected.

Union is life, war is returning to fragments.

— Remembering the sun is good for you, Rua lowed.

Your grief burns like tar.

But tomorrow you will see Diarmait perish and Queen Eanna rise.

Gold was from her banners, not Diarmait's locks.

I know it now.

— Eanna will never win, Chiaráin said, and his face darkened.

He took out the white bull's horn.

— You do not belong to war, Rua said.

I saved you three times:

At Loughmichnois.

At Cluain Ioraird.

At Inis Mór.

The fourth time, tomorrow,  
something terrible will happen.

But Chiaráin closed his ears to his cow and AO's words.

**58** On the next morning, Diarmait called his troops. He had three hundred soldiers, seventy archers, fifty three horses, and a black stallion beneath him. At his side, Chiaráin rode Rua. They waited for Queen Eanna by the shores of Loughmichnois. The black-headed seagulls did not dare to screech out their thoughts this time, and a row of herons watched, with sharp eyes, from the other side of the lake. The water smelled of rain and mallard's droppings. Carrion crows circled the clouds.

The horizon darkened and a tumultuous roar filled the air. Queen Eanna's army was so large that it filled the landscape. Minor clans had heard of Loughmichnois' battle and arrived to swear loyalty to the Queen, joining her in that last fight. Trained falcons flew over Eanna's warriors and her horses neighed, impatient for battle. Grass bent, herons flew away and otters hid beneath the water. The surface of Loughmichnois reflected the white sun of Beltane and its surface was calm.

— This is your last day on Éire, Diarmait, Queen Eanna said.

She wore leather armour with a breastplate of bronze to protect her ribcage, and a helmet on her head.

— It is my fate to be your opponent.

Here I am, I will not ignore AO's will.

— It is your fate to be sacrificed on Beltane,  
to die young and green, like the Bull God, Queen Eanna laughed.  
But, before I sever your head, I will honour Goíldeglass,  
Water God from Loughmichnois.

At the Queen's gesture, Druggan appeared, leading a pair of cows to the water. They were twins; both white with black spots and the pattern that finished in one continued in the other. These cows were only a spring old. They cried:

— Where is Mother?  
 We are Sisters?  
 We still need time,  
 we have not met the bull,  
 we have not grazed the high grass,  
 escaped the herder's gaze.  
 Where is Mother?  
 Where are Sisters?

Druggan took flaming branches and pushed the cows to the waves, saying:

— Finnian, from Cluain Ioraird, used to gift us golden calves,  
 and the most beautiful cows.  
 Now he says he does not pray for Queen Eanna anymore.  
 Says he is waiting for Chiaráin to come and finish his book.  
 Move, beasts, enough of that crying.  
 You will be sainted in Goildeglass' guts.

Druggan and three warriors followed the cows until the dark waters rose to their waists. The warriors held the cows by their horns while Druggan used the sacrificial knife to hamstring the animals, the same knife he had used to hamstring Chiaráin many Beltanes ago. There were bawls as the twin heifers sank beneath the dark mirror-surface of the lake.

Druggan said:

— Blessed be, Queen Eanna of the Uí Néill  
 daughter of the Tuatha Dé Dannan  
 wife of no one but her blade.  
 Goildeglass protect her.  
 Assure her victory one more time.  
 There shall be no other High-Queen in Éire.

He threw gold coins to the waters and a handful of human teeth.

When he was finished, the Queen said to Diarmait:

- Where is your druid?  
Where are the gifts that you have brought for the Water God?  
His kingdom will be our battlefield.  
Show some respect, youngster.

But Jarlath was nowhere to be seen. He had left Diarmait after his fight with Chiaráin and was travelling towards Cairbre at that moment.

Druggan said of Diarmait:

- He is godless.  
The outcome of this battle is already set.

Queen Eanna raised her sword, but lowered it when Chiaráin appeared from behind Diarmait. He and Rua advanced to meet Queen Eanna.

- AO is here behind Diarmait.  
And he who will be High-King of Éire does not need anyone else.

The Queen looked at him. And she saw what she thought was a beautiful bearded woman with a dark curly mane of hair, and olive skin, riding on the back of a large red cow. The woman's eyes were darker than the spaces between the stars at night. Queen Eanna did not like them.

- I have killed you before, at Inis Mór.  
You are the one who tried to steal my cows,  
the one I gifted to Cluain Ioraird,  
the Fir Bolg's pet.  
How can you be alive?  
Are you a ghost?  
A creature of the Otherworld?

- I am Chiaráin, you named me, he said.  
You sacrificed me to Goildeglass  
and murdered my sister.  
I have come here to honour your god.

And saying this, Chiaráin directed Rua towards the lake, and the cow walked into it, dark water licking her coat of fire.

— Goildeglass, come, show yourself to me, Chiaráin commanded.

And he used the secret language of the Fir Bolg to call for the Water God. And down under the waves, under the reeds, the otters' dens, the fish, the water spiders, toads and seaweed, the Silver Snake opened an eye and heard Chiaráin's calling and he swam up, fast as lightning, to the surface of the lake.

This is what they all saw:

The waters, clear and smooth as a mirror, trembled and cracked. A freezing rush of air sent the bog orchids and the blue-eyed grass on a mad dance. The black-headed seagulls flew away first, screeching, and after them, a whirlwind of birds followed: gadwalls, white geese, mallards, curlews, lapwings and mute swans. The sky was so crowded with birds that their shadows swallowed the last beam of sun. Another flurry of rain scratched the lake's surface. It stank of rotten eggs, of meat turning green, and of old silver. A huge purple wave formed in the middle of Loughmichnois.

— Move, Queen Eanna yelled to her warriors.

Goildeglass is about to come out  
and those who look at him shall turn blind  
and lose all reason.

The wave blasted the shore like a mountain crumbling. It struck Diarmait and the Queen's troops.

Goildeglass appeared. He had the head of a viper and four crystal fangs protruding from his gaping jaws. The transparent scales on his long-coiled body were made of bone and liquid silver and they shone with an iridescent spark. Two sets of braided horns crowned his head between his translucent eyes. A mist of blue, mossy hair extended from his forehead, along his spine, and his forelimbs resembled something between lynx paws and lizard claws. Around the trunk of his body, water boiled and turned white.

— Goildeglass, hear me, Chiaráin called him from the shore.

Goildeglass, why do you feed on dead bodies  
and the sad offerings they bring in your name?  
You know nothing of time and you are trapped in this lake.

You are but a prisoner of the human race.

The Water God was lured by these strange words. He remembered Chiaráin's body-scent of olives and warm sun and sniffed the air searching for him. His claws flexed in the waters while his body contorted, bringing his muzzle close to Chiaráin's face. The saint brushed the divine scales of Goílderglass but avoided his burning gaze.

Chiaráin brought forth the horn of the white bull from Inis Mór. And he raised it and sank it between the Water God's eyes, right where a smooth patch of flesh stretched, unprotected by the scales.

And that is how Chiaráin killed Goílderglass and the Water Curse was released upon Éire and the rest of the world.

**59** The Water God screeched and the sound of his pain exploded eardrums and stopped hearts. Goílderglass's body twisted, coiling and thrashing, turning the lake's surface to foam, and finally convulsed before falling back into the depth of the waters. Chiaráin turned back, the bull's horn still in his hands, searching for Queen Eanna's gaze. He met her eyes and said:

— This is your god,  
go pray to him now.

**60** When Goílderglass's corpse hit the waters, a great wave of darkness spread. It was larger than any mountain on Éire, and it grew out of thick poisonous mud. This time, whole armies fled, screaming. When the black avalanche slammed to the ground, many were killed, including Queen Eanna, but others escaped, and amongst them was Diarmait. A deadly odour of boiled blood and fish covered the ground for three days and three nights. After that, Loughmichnois and its poisonous mud dried and disappeared, giving way to extremely fertile land. Where Goílderglass had fallen, a silver river appeared that would henceforth be known as Abha na Sionainne.

**61** When Chiaráin fell into the water, the dark mud filled his nose, travelled down to his throat and into his lungs. He stopped breathing and his heartbeat slowed. Rua dived into the waters looking for him. When she found him, she grabbed his tunic with her muzzle and brought him back to the surface. And so his life was saved a fourth time, but the poisonous mud burned the red cow's hair, and from that moment on, she was the colour of charcoal, dull and grey. Her eyes turned milky white and could not receive the light

## VI

### CLUAIN MICH NÓIS

**62** Word travelled all over Éire that Chiaráin had killed Goídeglass and that Loughmichnois had disappeared, leaving strange blue fields and a silver river behind. From that moment on, people referred to Chiaráin as Saint Chiaráin and they came from all over the island to see him and contemplate his miracle. Word also spread that Diarmait would be crowned High-King of Éire on the next Samhain, and no other clan leader or warrior dared to challenge him.

**63** Chiaráin and Rua stood on the blue fields and refused to leave what once had been the bottom of Loughmichnois. The mute swans, the mallards and the black-headed seagulls moved to the river and other wet places. Mice came to feed on the blue-eyed grass, the bog orchids and the cherry bird trees. Stoats and shrews followed.

Diarmait knelt next to the saint and said to him:

— Chiaráin, your eyes are dull like stones.

Your skin is grey, silver-powered.

Tell me what I can do to heal you.

— My tongue feels like wood-ash, the saint answered.

Please, bring me some water.

Diarmait rushed to the river and brought clear water in his upturned helmet. Chiaráin drank but was not satisfied. Diarmait went back to the river and brought more water and he did so many times. Every time the saint drank, his body bloated but he was never satiated. By his side, Rua curled around herself. The tips of her horns were dark and one of them was shattered and stained with black blood.

— The whole river will not quench my thirst, Chiaráin cried.

Not even the whole Bán Sea can calm me now.

Diarmait took Chiaráin in his oak-strong arms and bore him to the riverside, walking into the cold currents. The water was tainted by the gold rays of the dying sun. He submerged Chiaráin's body in the waves that smelled of pebbles and algae. After a while, Chiaráin's cracked skin started healing.

- Hush, Diarmait whispered, rest.  
You have given me Éire and now I shall protect you.  
I will give you anything you ask for,  
between the ground and the skies.  
Saint Chiaráin, your name will outlive the Water God's  
and will be tangled with mine forever.
- I want stones, said Chiaráin, huge limestones from Inis Mór  
I want to build a fort, like Dún Dúchathair.  
What I learned, the secrets I keep,  
they shall not be lost.  
The Book of Cluain Ioraird,  
the blue and white power of Inis Mór.  
What I know I shall share with everyone  
so I can save them from the Water God's curse.
- What curse? Diarmait asked.  
What are you saying?
- Goíldeglass has left, but the world, like me, craves water.  
There will be rain, and seas that will grow larger than any lake.
- Your words come from grief, you are still confused, Diarmait said.  
Feel the healing water, there is no curse here.  
You are a favourite of AO, you are blessed.  
And I shall do as you ask and build a school.

That same night, Diarmait dug a hole in the blue fields and brought water from the river to fill it until it was like a small well. He took Chiaráin there and let him rest with all his body under the water, except for the head. This gave the saint great relief. He rarely emerged from this healing water, and the well would be known as Saint Chiaráin's Well for centuries to come, its water bestowing miracles.

— Take care of Rua, please, I cannot move, Chiaráin implored Diarmait.

The warrior scrubbed the cow's grey hair, but the red colour was gone forever. He washed the cow's white eyes but he could not heal them. Rua refused to move and stood silent by the well. Diarmait went down to the marsh and walked until he found a white rock soaking up the moonlight. He carried it back to Saint Chiaráin and said:

— This is the first stone of Cluain Mich Nóis.

Here we shall erect the towers of knowledge.

**64** During the following days, Diarmait organised the people who had come from all over Éire to Cluain Mich Nóis and together they started building a small temple, made of stones and bog-wood, around Chiaráin, Rua and the well. The saint did not eat or drink anything apart from the river water. He was always thirsty and only when it rained could he breathe, relieved from the dry pain.

— I am so thirsty, Rua, he mumbled.

But the cow did not respond. Since the death of Goílderglass she had lost her will to speak.

After a few moons, the temple was completed. Saint Chiaráin spoke for the first time to the people:

— Listen, my time is coming.

Before I go, I shall share with you my grass books  
and the secrets of cattle, milk, and how to deceive the rain.

**65** One day, three monks arrived, dressed in black habits, and guiding a herd of cows with calves, all of them white as clouds, and healthy.

Chiaráin saw them approaching and asked:

— Who are you and why do you bring cattle?

The first monk showed him a piece of parchment, unable to speak because his lips were stitched closed. It was a letter from Finnian of Cluain Ioraird, and this is what it said:

Finnian: Chiaráin, blessed be.  
 You have expelled the serpent from Éire  
 like Pádraig promised.  
 Here I send you Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh.  
 They keep a sweet memory of you in their hearts  
 from when you were a brother and inspired them.  
 Take them with you, I am too old to travel.  
 Take our cattle too,  
 and make your own book.

— Cainnech, Laisrén, Ninnidh, free the animals, ordered Chiaráin.  
 Let them roam.

And Cainnech, Laisrén and Ninnidh obeyed and did as Chiaráin commanded.  
 And the cows ran to the woodland in the marsh and were never seen again. Cows  
 without herders are beautiful wild beings, faster than any wind and shy like deer.

— And now, Chiaráin told the three monks, unstitch your mouths.  
 I want you to speak and answer for your sins.

The monks pulled at the stitches and soon their lips were covered in crimson.  
 Their voices were weak and childlike because they had not used them for many years.

— Saint Chiaráin, we heard of your miracles, Cainnech said.

— Saint Chiaráin, you have found the next High-King of Éire, Laisrén  
 said.

— Saint Chiaráin, you killed a god, Ninnidh said.

And then Laisrén added:

— Saint Chiaráin, we want to know why the rain falls,  
 why we live in the darkest island.

Does AO even bother to look this way for us?

We want to know the secrets of cattle.

We want to know what is to happen.

We want to know.

— I hear you, brothers, Chiaráin answered.

Stay in Cluain Mich Nóis if you wish so.

I shall entrust you Rua.

Attend to her as the Virgin Mary attended to her celestial son.

This cow has taught me more than any human master.

If it is her will, she shall reveal the secrets to you.

And from that day on, the three monks stayed at Saint Chiaráin's temple. Before the sun rose above the horizon, they went out looking for blue-eyed grass covered in dew, and they collected the most tender buds to feed Rua. And they brushed the heifer's hair and cleaned her and procured her comfort.

**66** By Lughnasadh, the blue fields of Cluain Mich Nóis bloomed and there were cherries, blackberries, elderberries, dog roses, strawberries and apples, thriving thanks to the Silver River. A stoneworker called Ailbe came from Dal Riata to work on a high cross that was to stand facing north. She carved the story of Saint Chiaráin and his miracles, of his encounter with Diarmait and of how Cluain Mich Nóis had come to exist. She had heard the story of the saint killing Goídeglass with a bull's horn, and knew of the saint's love for his cow, so she carved an image of Chiaráin horned, like Cerunnos.

Every night, people gathered inside Saint Chiaráin's temple and he taught them the secrets of writing, of making books from high grass, of cooking the blue ointment which protected the skin from the rain, and he taught them of the power of breast milk. Everyone listened except for Diarmait, who was becoming restless. He came to the saint when the sky was dark and said to him:

— I see you are recovering,  
 building up Cluain Mich Nóis has been like stitching your wounds.  
 You share knowledge, and through knowledge there is hope.  
 Come with me in Samhain, to Tara,  
 where I will be crowned High-King.  
 Be my advisor.  
 We shall keep Éire together.

But Chiaráin said:

- I prayed to AO for Queen Eanna's defeat  
and now look, she is forever with us here, in Cluain Mich Nóis.  
Her bones melt in the waters that feed our fruit.  
My fate is set.  
I shall finish my life as she did, in the water.

And Saint Chiaráin refused to be moved and did not follow Diarmait when he left.

**67** With the coming of Samhain, Chiaráin's skin turned grey, like the stone of the high cross, and started to crack. His hair was silver straw and his eyes lightened, from dark brown to an amber hue. Rua had not moved for many days either, and her body was wrinkled like a raisin. When the sun came out, she spoke to Saint Chiaráin for the first time in many moons. She said:

- Chiaráin, I want you to safeguard the secrets,  
you should preserve everything at Cluain Mich Nóis.  
Grass is weak and once you go, they may not remember.  
Take my skin instead,  
I will be your book.

And Chiaráin said:

- Rua, my friend, I want to cry but  
only dust comes to my eyes.  
You brought me back to life here, where Loughmichnois once stood,  
and now I have brought a curse on you all.  
Creating a book from you would be like eating my own entrails.  
Rua, please, stay with me.
- Chiaráin, I want to tell the others.  
I want my skin to be turned into pages  
which explain where everything came from  
and what to do to go back to AO.

Chiaráin, do it yourself,

cut me,

wash me,

dry me.

Through the book, you will make me immortal.

Drink from me now, and regain your strength.

Rua offered her white, virgin teats to Saint Chiaráin, and when he drank from them, his thirst was finally quenched and he healed. When he finished, Rua was cold and rigid and her flesh smelled of withered elder flowers.

Chiaráin said:

— I thought I was beyond grief  
after seeing Leah, murdered.

Now my soul cracks a third time.

I shall come back, he promised, and find you again, friend.

And he embraced the cow and cried. Then he called for the monks of Cluain Ioraird and took the semi-lunar knife from them to flay his friend. Rua's hide was soft as silk, and did not emit any odour. Chiaráin washed it himself in lime water, without feeling any burning in his cold hands. He stretched it under the sun and when it was dry, he smoothed the surface with the semi-lunar knife.

**68** Wild cattle came from the woods because they had smelled Rua's skin warming under the sun. Black cows led the herd, and these were the ones brought as a sacrifice for Goídeglass by Diarmait's druid before the Loughmichnois battle. Their horns had grown back, long and smooth as crescent moons. Their limbs were strong and nimble. They all surrounded the stretched skin and licked it with their rough pink tongues. Rua's skin smoothed and turned a pearl colour. Cattle ran all around Cluain Mich Nóis, over the mud and through the blue high grass, and people looked at the animals as though witnessing a miracle, because they had never seen cattle unguarded. These cows were more beautiful than the goddess Hathor and the golden calf. People feared their sharp horns but admired the lustrous hair and the elegance of their limbs. By evening time, all the cattle rested around Chiaráin, and the saint whispered to them while he cut Rua's skin into pages and bound them together with thread and a bone needle. Then he wrote for many moons.

**69** The night he finished the book, Chiaráin called for the three beauties of Cluain Ioraird and told them to keep the manuscript safe in Cluain Mich Nóis. Then, he asked them to build for him a boat made from the wood of apple trees and to cover it with what was left of Rua's skin. Once the boat was finished, Chiaráin coated the hull with the blue ointment from the Fir Bolg. The black cows gathered around, curious. When he stepped inside, the monks pushed the vessel into the river. Two black cows jumped into the boat with the saint, and the others ran into the waters and swam, following the slow pace of the boat.

— Where are you going, Saint Chiaráin? the monks shouted after him.

— I will go wherever AO carries me.

The mountains down to the Bán Sea.

My sweet Iberia.

Some mysterious land.

The current carried the boat further away and the cows followed it, swimming. The monks stayed on the riverbank, and prayed to AO. People who had come to Cluain Mich Nóis from all over Éire, witnessed his departure. Rain fell furiously against the grass, and a pearl mist closed, like a curtain, around the river. The boat and the cows shrank into small black dots and were finally swallowed by the purple waves of the twilight

# **THE BULL'S BETROTHED**



## THE THREE BAPTISMS OF LA NIÑA DE IRLANDA

by

Ciarán de la Cierva<sup>2</sup>

**España, 1931**

**I.**

The ship from Ireland arrived in the Land of Everlasting Sun, where the clouds were yellow and the skies a kindly blue. The warm wind smelled of olive trees and shellfish. Sunlight melted on the sand, forming a crust of sparkling crystal. The white houses in front of the port glowed. Storks watched the deck from their perches on the masts. They flew down to the beach to snatch crabs and fish that had fallen from the fishmongers' boxes, competing with the seagulls for the best bite.

The sailors took the cows, the bulls and the girl out of the hold. She was not a corpse but she wasn't alive, either. She had been the Girl with Apple Cheeks before, but now her body was soulless. She was a statue. She had turned into La Niña. The sailors were so afraid of her that they left her on the pier and ran away. And there she lay, dressed in a black tunic and a white scapular, surrounded by a herd of monstrous black bulls with fierce metal eyes, and horns like crescent moons. They bellowed at anyone who dared to come too close. The shadow of a hook hanging from the top of a crane circled around them like a vulture.

People came for the cows. Cattle keepers armed with cedar canes took the bulls, too. But nobody came for La Niña, who lay amongst wet pieces of rope and fish carcasses.

A man passed by her side.

'Eh, niña... niña...' He bent over, shaking her arm. He tried to take her scapular off, thinking that she was suffocating in the heat of such a stifling day.

'What are you doing?' A woman approached them. 'Let the girl alone.'

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<sup>2</sup> Extract of what is left from the novelette titled *The Three Baptisms of La Niña de Irlanda*. The story was published periodically in 1936 BF in the literary magazine *Cruz y Raya*, founded by José Bergamín. Three chapters – now lost – preceded this extract. Little is known about the author, Ciarán de la Cierva, one of the most obscure writers from the Second Spanish Republic.

A small crowd gathered around the girl, who lay stiff as a figure made from alabaster.

‘Is he bothering the girl?’

‘Why is she on the floor?’

‘There’s a man here molesting a girl...’

‘I haven’t done anything, you bastards.’ The man put his flat hat on and stalked away.

‘Come here, niña... what’s the matter?’ A fishmonger woman tried to help her stand. ‘Water?’

‘Give her this...’ Another woman took a hip flask from her bosom.

Then, the most extraordinary event took place. The iron hook came loose and fell. This hook was heavy and sharp, like a bull’s horn. It landed on La Niña’s tender face. The women screamed but La Niña remained voiceless.

‘La Virgen purísima...’

‘God help us.’

‘Is she dead?’

‘Let me see, let me see...’ The hip flask woman kneeled at the girl’s side. With her gloved hands, dirty with salt, dried blood and fish’s entrails, she held the hook. The girl’s nose was red and had started swelling, its bridge slightly moved to the left side. La Niña let out a small breath. Not a single drop of blood came from the wound. The fishmonger stepped back, murmuring a prayer.

‘Padre nuestro, que estás en los cielos...’

A short man appeared behind her.

‘My uncle is a doctor...’ The short man wore an old striped suit and an expensive leather ivy cap. ‘He’ll take care of her.’ His eyes were yellow and cunning, like those of an old greyhound.

Nobody objected.

And that’s how La Niña ended up in the back of a cart pulled by a one-eyed horse, sitting on boxes of smuggled Jerez liquor. The sea became a thin line on the horizon. The afternoon sun roasted the track, which was edged with prickly, grey bushes and small olive trees.

The Man with Yellow Dog Eyes didn't take her to a doctor but to an orchard of almond trees. Red, green and blue wagons were stationed there. Horses grazed in the shade, whilst people swam and washed clothes in the nearby stream. They were all part of Madame Mariposa's Maravilloso Circus: that is why three sinuous golden 'M's were painted on the side of every wagon. The Man with Yellow Dog Eyes took La Niña to a wagon separated from the rest. Next to it, five little brown girls played with the almond flowers that carpeted the ground, tossing them in the air and letting them fall on their heads as if they were snow. The man knocked down the castle they had built from several tinplated buckets.

'Go get water,' he shouted at them.

He knocked on the door. A smell of kohl and tobacco came from inside.

'Who is this?' a nicotine-rough voice asked.

'Me. I bring you something.'

Madame Mariposa stepped out. She had ebony skin and ringlets that fell down her back like a cascade of midnight. She wore a bulky red dress and a single pearl earring. Her ample bosom rested on her rounded belly. She stared at La Niña, who had no apple-like cheeks anymore, but empty eyes the colour of a squall. La Niña's nose was black and swollen like a rotten potato.

'What does she do?'

'Well, she...'

'What's your name, niña?' Madame Mariposa grabbed La Niña's chin.

'She doesn't speak.'

'What?'

The Man with Yellow Dog Eyes slapped La Niña twice. She collapsed onto the floor.

'Did you see that? She doesn't feel it. And...'

'She doesn't bleed or scream or...'

Madam Mariposa frowned, playing with her pearl earring.

They tried everything to make the girl react.

The Man with Yellow Dog Eyes poked La Niña's arm with his slender knife.

Madame Mariposa pricked her lips with the earring's screw.

The Man with Yellow Dog Eyes stabbed his belt's prong on the girl's inner elbow.

Madame Mariposa pushed needles into La Niña's burned fingertips.

Not a single drop of blood.

And that's how La Niña gained her third name.

The Maiden of Squall Eyes.

The circus people were sure the Maiden of Squall Eyes was a stray martyr, like the ones they had seen at church in the form of carved statues, but because they all knew there was no space in heaven for artists and acrobats, they were not scared of using her to make money. Thus, they got rid of her nun-like clothes and dressed her in a raggedy bridal dress, once used by the clowns. Madame Mariposa turned one of her old silk handkerchiefs into a veil to cover her face. Whenever they arrived at any village, they made the Maiden of Squall Eyes stand inside a wooden receptacle as narrow as a coffin. Around her they placed flowers, wrinkled mass cards, red candles and small figures of San Antonio and baby Jesus.

'We bring the Maiden of Squall Eyes,' the Man with Yellow Dog Eyes shouted. 'We bring the Maid of Squall Eyes, who saw La Virgen and was forgiven the sin of blood... who wants to see the Maiden of Squall Eyes? She'll ask La Virgen to heal you...'

The curious gathered around. Anxious parents spent a peseta so their sick infants could touch the girl's frozen feet. Old women kissed the Maid of Squall Eye's dry wounds, praying for daughters and sons living in faraway lands. Young men peeked under her veil: a pattern of blue and purple veins played under her skin. Her broken nose was an aggressive mountain in the calm geography of her face. Black circles of dried skin surrounded her eyelids. The Maiden of Squall Eyes never cried.

## II.

Madame Mariposa's Maravilloso Circus arrived in the largest city in the Land of Everlasting Sun, Madrid. The yellow buildings were tall and full of eyes and mouths. The city didn't smell of manure and holm oaks, but of asphalt and gasoline. Waves of iridescent pigeons occupied the streets, feeding on food waste.

It was La Inmaculada Day, the yearly celebration of the Virgin Mary, and everyone from miles around had gathered in La Plaza de la Constitución. The circus had secured a small stand in the square, where they brought the Maiden of Squall Eyes. La Plaza was surrounded by porticoes, with the afternoon sun shining on the painted façade of the Bakery House. Hawkers pushed handcarts stacked with caramelised apples, fried chorizo, and creamy buñuelos. Nuns walked in couples, selling candles to the devoted. Drunk students followed them, trying to lift their brown habits. An old lady covered morcillas in pig's blood before roasting them on her portable stove. Families sat on the benches drinking sour hot chocolate and peeling roasted chestnuts. A bunch of girls climbed onto the bronze statue of King Felipe the Second, and rode his horse, while they sang and drank Moscatel.

'The Maiden of Squall Eyes is here, she's here...' The Man with Yellow Dog Eyes passed his leather ivy cap around. People threw cents on it and queued in front of the wooden box. During La Inmaculada day, everyone was rich.

'The Maiden of Squall Eyes is here... The Maiden of Squall Eyes is here...'

A group of school kids from La Institución paused in front of the girl's box. Their teacher, Profesor Yebra, had organised a special field trip. All carried portable blackboards and small chisels.

'What's that?' one of the kids asked, pointing out the ghostly figure inside the box.

Before Profesor Yebra could answer, some other kids ran towards the stand, ignoring the complaints coming from further back in the queue. One ripped the silky veil aside, to find a cadaveric face beneath. He screamed. The brown scabs on the Maiden of Squall Eyes' fingertips, and the movement in her chest were her only signs of life. Another school kid poked a large grey scar on the girl's arm, but she just

blinked. This encouraged one of his classmates, who took a candle to burn the Maiden of Squall eye's forearm. Another used his chisel on her shoulder.

The Man of Yellow Dog Eyes was too busy counting money, and when he realised what was happening, it was too late to contain the mob of excited schoolboys.

‘Rufianes... go away...’

‘Boys, come back here, come back...’ Profesor Yebra shouted, grabbing an arm here, an ear there. People started laughing when one child tried to introduce a baby Jesus figure into the girl's blueish mouth. They threw chestnut peelings at her. The boys hauled the girl out from the box, pulling her hair and ripping her dress.

The Maiden of Squall Eyes reacted slowly to the pain. The blond hairs on her forearms, and her burned fingertips remembered El Toro. Her nostrils retained small particles of his tar stink and she could still hear his bellows.

Grasping hands.

Poking fingers.

The Maiden of Squall Eyes was about to fall into pieces.

Sharp biting teeth

A sour flash climbed up the girl's throat and her body bent when she retched.

Red splatters on the boys' white shirts.

Screeches.

The Maiden of Squall Eyes kept throwing up blood.

‘Good grief, what's going on here?’

A woman with lustrous dark curls, wearing a calfskin overcoat, pushed the kids out of her way. She kicked their naked calves with her high heels until they cried and hid behind Profesor Yebra.

‘What's all this about?’

The Maiden of Squall Eyes, covered in blood and sweat, collapsed on the floor.

‘She...’ The Man with Yellow Dog Eyes tried to take charge of the situation, but the woman blocked his way and kneeled in front of the Maiden of Squall Eyes. The girl was thin as a skeleton and the dirt in her skin was indistinguishable from

ulcers. Her white dress stuck to her limbs like a placenta. She smelled of blood and sickness. The woman patted the girl's face gently, but she didn't open her eyes.

'Get off her...'

'What?' She faced Madame Mariposa's man.

'Who are you?' He insisted.

'I'm the person who's going to call the police right now so they can send this little business of yours to hell.' The woman spat while she spoke.

'Three pesetas and she's yours,' he said.

The woman checked her pockets and threw a few copper cents at him.

'Go away now, you bastard, or I call the police.'

The Man with Yellow Dog Eyes took the coins and stepped back. He considered shouting back at the woman, hitting her, even, but his canine instinct told him there was something dangerous in that brunette lady. Perhaps it was the way her small hands seemed rough and strong, or the way her red lips stood out in the young, yet wrinkled, face. He had already made a lot of money from the Maiden of Squall Eyes, but now that she was bleeding again, there was no business. Every meteoric career in the circus had a quick end and the Maiden of Squall Eyes had reached hers. He let her go.

The woman whispered calming words and held the girl's hands. She took her calfskin overcoat off and covered the girl to keep her warm in that December afternoon.

'My name is Carmen,' the woman whispered, leaning over the Maiden of Squall Eyes. Something moved under the woman's skirt. Perhaps it was the wind.

Or the black, hairy tail of the bull.

El Toro.

## THE DELIGHTFUL GARDEN

1931-1932

### Lesson 1: Yo soy, tú eres, yo estoy, tú estás, ven. ¡Aquí!

‘Yo soy Carmen,’ said the woman, kneeling in front of the body hunched under the set of black bookshelves that encircled the space like mute giants. The only light came from the street lamps outside and the dying embers on the fireplace, so it was difficult to see the girl. A dense smell of roasted lamb and fresh seafood drifted from the dining-room. Carmen coughed to cover up her nausea.

‘Yo soy Carmen,’ she repeated, this time pointing at herself.

The girl didn’t move.

Carmen bent forwards. The girl held her bony knees against her chest. She was wearing Carmen’s old hospital nightgown, but it was too tight and short.

‘Yo... soy... Carmen,’ the woman said a third time, knocking on the marble floor, sweat dripping between her breasts enclosed in the new dress. Her feet were swelling inside the lacquered high-heels and the pearl necklace felt too heavy. ‘Yo soy Carmen... and you, ¿Tú eres...?’

Carmen grabbed the girls’ hands – Dios, they were large, and so cold – and shook them.

‘¿Tú eres...?’

The girl turned her face to the shadows and pulled her hands from Carmen’s.

‘¿Tú eres... tú eres... tú...?’

Pedro, wearing his battered evening suit, entered the room.

‘People are coming...’ He didn’t look at the girl.

‘Is she deaf?’ Carmen took the glass of Tempranillo wine he offered her.

‘Well, we just need to drop something when she’s not looking to see if she reacts...’ Pedro took a sip of his own glass.

‘Ven, come here...’ Carmen put her wine on the floor and stood up, pulling the girl to the corner of the room. The girl was as tall as Pedro, so it was tricky to move her around. She remained where she was set, looking at the wall.

Pedro took a big volume from the bookshelf, but Carmen hissed.

‘Don’t you dare to spoil my Bernini’s catalogue. Use your *Old Testament*.’

Pedro grabbed *El Quijote* and threw the heavy book against the floor. The covers splattered open and the girl turned back, scratching the fresh scars on her hands.

‘See?’ he said. ‘Now make sure she stays inside the room, or else think of something creative to tell our guests if they see her wandering around...’

Pedro left.

‘Tú estás en la habitación. You stay in the room, hear me?’ Carmen made the girl sit on the divan facing the window. ‘Tú estás en la habitación. Yo estoy out there. Stop scratching. And if you hear any noise, if someone tries to open the door or if they knock... you stay here. Aquí.’

Carmen knocked on the floor.

‘Aquí. Here. Do you understand?’

The girl kept scratching.

Christmas songs started playing in the living room. People were cheering for the one-year-old Spanish Republic. Carmen stood up but cringed, holding her belly. She was not in the mood for parties.

‘Damn it.’ She didn’t bother with smoothing out her dress. Instead, she pointed to the chamber pot under the divan. ‘You know what to do with that. Josefa will come to check on you at some point. I won’t be too late. Pedro has promised everyone will be out by midnight.’

## **Lesson 2: Ven, quieta, mira, no tengas miedo**

On a sunny February afternoon, Carmen brought the girl to the studio. She hadn’t been there in the last few months. She preferred to lie on the living room sofa, the sketches made by her students surrounding her like autumn leaves. She barely looked at the pages as she marked them. The young girls she taught were so annoying; they knew nothing about art. They just wanted to model figures of their ugly pet dogs or make flowery pots to keep their jewellery in... They hadn’t experienced any harshness in their short, unoriginal lives. No one could expect them to tame stone.

Carmen had lain on that sofa during the weeks after she came home from the hospital. The pillows that Pedro had stuffed under her – filled with lamb’s wool – hurt as if they were made of marble. Her insides were sour. She was like a walnut someone had emptied with a knife. She had tried to explain that feeling to others, but words didn’t come to her lips during the first weeks. Pedro fed her and took her to the lavatory because she refused to use the chamber pot. Whenever he held her so she could sit straight on the toilet, she cried from the pain but hid her face from him. At some point, he suggested praying together. She screamed at him until he was gone. Now the soreness remained, but her body had rebuilt itself around it. It was difficult to leave the sofa, though. Her well-deserved throne of agony.

The studio was full of crammed shelves, books, statues, clay and stone dust. It opened up to a balcony offering a view of Madrid’s orange tiled roofs. Pieces from a broken mirror hung outside to scare the pigeons. The pots of money plants and the calabash were still green – Pedro must have been watering them.

‘Ven.’ She asked the girl to stay on the stand placed in the middle of the room. ‘Quieta,’ Carmen ordered once the girl was up there. ‘I’m going to sketch you.’

She pinned a piece of paper to the board and took the charcoal. The sunshine entering through the balcony illuminated the snowflakes of dust falling around the girl. She wore Pedro’s nightgown and was barefoot. Her legs were covered in a dark fur, which contrasted with her blond-almost-white mane of hair. Her blue eyes looked beyond the walls, face pale as the winter clouds. Like an apparition, the girl didn’t match any of the objects in the room. She didn’t belong there.

‘Quieta... very well.’ Carmen drafted the tall, angular body, paying special attention to the large hands.

‘You are going to be my model for my Saint Ciarán statue, are you okay with that?’ Carmen liked to chat when she was drawing. ‘When I got that commission from the Irish College I thought it was... shit, I don’t even give a fuck about Dios, all the saints and... but I needed the money, after the... and then I found you, and Saint Ciarán was kind of a funny thing, I bet you didn’t know he was always riding a cow... ha. Now, we’re in Spain so I thought it’d be funny if he rides a bull instead... wait, I’ll show you.’

She started looking through the pieces of paper she kept in boxes until she found the big rolled canvas that depicted a large bull's head.

‘Mira.’

She opened it out.

The girl started screaming.

Carmen thought she was in a dream. The girl had never made any sound at all, not since the day she had rescued her, not even when she was treating her wounds.

The girl leapt down from the platform and ran towards the locked door. She tried to open it. She kept on screaming, kicking the door, banging her head against it. Carmen watched her, fascinated. Finally, she came to her side and grabbed the girl's wide shoulders.

‘No tengas miedo, don't be afraid,’ Carmen whispered. Then she slapped the girl's face.

The screams died.

### **Lesson 3: Hazlo, desnúdate, no tengas vergüenza**

Carmen hid the picture of the bull before bringing the girl back to the studio. She didn't quite understand how the girl tolerated Éboli – Carmen's one-eyed cat – but was terrified by a picture of an animal.

She made the girl pose.

Sitting on her knees.

Lying on the floor, head twisted towards the balcony.

Standing, staring at the floor, embracing herself.

Carmen's favourite parts were the girl's large, bony hands and feet, robust like the roots of an oak. Her face structure was fascinating too: a wide forehead, small eyes the colour of a sunless day, broken nose, full cheeks and a modest mouth of thin lips. It was as if an artist had started carving a classic Greek bust – such as the ones Carmen had copied at the San Fernando's Royal Academy of Fine Arts – but one night had decided – drunk – to add the features of unrequited love. You could still feel the rage. The mixture didn't work, but that's what made it appealing.

Carmen left the sketchbook on the side and got the scissors. The girl didn't move. The scars on her arms and hands proved she was well used to sharp objects.

'That's better,' Carmen mumbled after trimming the locks of hair that shadowed the girl's face. She kept sketching, marvelling at the girl's figure, which was just vaguely alive, like the best-carved statues. This girl, she couldn't be more than seventeen. A peasant, perhaps, or a nun. Or a prostitute. Carmen didn't care.

By the twelfth day, Carmen had enough studies of the face, hands, legs and feet.

'Desnúdate. Take your clothes off.' She mimicked the action. 'I need to see the whole thing.'

The girl, sitting on the platform, blinked.

'Good grief.' Carmen started unbuttoning the girl's nightgown, but she crossed her arms over her breasts and curled in on herself, tight as a stone.

'¿Tienes vergüenza? Are you ashamed?' Carmen stopped pulling at the girl's clothes. 'You can't, look, you're my model. I need this.'

She tried to grab her again, but the girl rolled on the floor and started banging her head against the marble.

'Fuck, stop that.' Carmen stood up, showing her hands. 'Not touching you, okay?'

The girl went back to her original curled-stone position. This was like trying to convince Éboli to get into the basket, when she'd moved from her ramshackle room to Pedro's apartment. She didn't want to oppress the girl's wilderness, though. She needed that for her statue, not just the fear.

She kneeled down the girl and whispered:

'We are both women. Why do you feel ashamed?'

The girl closed her eyes but kept scratching her arms. She smelled of rancid sweat and oily hair – Carmen should remind Josefa, the maid, to wash her more often. She grabbed the girl's chin.

'Look at me, no tengas vergüenza.'

The girl closed her eyes more tightly. Fresh blood ran down her arms.

Carmen clicked her tongue.

‘Very well.’

She stood in front of the girl, unbuttoning her own blouse and her brown skirt. She didn’t wear any lingerie when she was at home, she always found it annoying, like dressing in another person’s skin. She looked at her own breasts, crowned with pink, hairy nipples. The purple stretch marks on them were tentacles under the flesh. A collection of sharp bones protruded from her body: hips, hands, wrists, knees, ankles. Blades struggling to open the dry skin. She hated that old leather colour and the unfamiliar smell. And, of course, the horror. That bloated abdomen, adorned with a trail of pink stitches starting below her navel and hiding under the black hair of her sex. The scar was six-months old, but still felt tender. Carmen scrubbed it as if she could erase it. She cringed, enjoying the pain. She lifted her eyes and discovered the girl staring at the scar.

‘Do you like it?’ she said, taking the girl’s hand and making her feel the stitches. ‘They took everything out.’

The girl’s cold fingers on her belly were light as flies.

‘You know what a woman is? A woman is a vessel containing two fallopian tubes, two ovaries and the most important thing: a womb. Well, I don’t have any of that anymore. What am I then?’

The girl hadn’t stopped looking at her for a second.

Carmen felt exultant.

#### **Lesson 4: ¿Tienes hambre? ¿Tienes hambre? ¿Tienes hambre?**

By March, Carmen couldn’t stand the girl’s silence anymore. Yes, the girl knew how to pose. She could stay immobile for hours in the studio, even naked. And that was all.

Carmen knew she had tried hard. Josefa took the girl to the lavatory every morning, afternoon and evening, but Carmen was the one bathing the girl on Sundays. She would fill up the tin with almost boiling water. Brush in hand, and limb by limb, she made sure the girl’s skin was bright as the moon, although sometimes the hot water, or the scars, filling with fresh with blood, ruined the result. Carmen wanted to

enjoy it – the cleansing of the body as an attempt to see through the girl’s soul – but it was more like emptying the cat’s tray when Josefa was not around.

Carmen was also the one feeding the girl. She knew food had to be important – that was how babies bonded to their mothers, by the tit. She sat next to the girl, holding spoons full of chorizo and lentil soup to her lips. When pushed, the girl would open her mouth and chew, faintly. And that was all.

One day Carmen thought that, if the girl starved, she would end up speaking or calling for attention in some other way.

‘Don’t give her even a colin, Josefa, you hear me?’ She ordered the maid.

‘But Señora... the poor creature is already thin as a baby bird.’

Since the Republic, it seemed that everyone had the right to be opinionated. That’s why servants such as Josefa had begun to argue with their employers. Dios, the other day she even asked Carmen what she thought of women’s gaining the right to divorce, and why she didn’t go to church with Pedro.

‘Josefa, I told you. Don’t go behind my back, you hear me?’

‘Sí Señora. No food for the girl,’ the servant replied, the tone of her voice showing how little she approved of Carmen keeping a foreign girl in her house – a girl mature enough to get married and birth babies – when she didn’t have children of her own.

‘¿Tienes hambre? You’re hungry, aren’t you?’ Carmen asked the girl during second day. The girl seemed paler, but it may have been because of the early morning’s light.

‘¿Tienes hambre?’ Carmen kept asking her. ‘Comida.’ She picked up a chocolate from the box she was holding and chewed it noisily. It was slightly mouldy – it had been there since Christmas. Nothing. She opened her mouth to show the girl. Nothing. She licked her finger and drew a chocolate line on the girl’s lips. Nothing.

‘Very well. Sketching time, then.’

In the studio, Carmen tried to concentrate in the girl’s thighs and the way they led into the elegant sphere of her kneecaps.

‘I’m done with you.’ Carmen slammed down her notepad. ‘Why don’t you even try? You’re not making any effort, you idiot.’

Carmen threw the charcoal at her. It hit the girl in the chest, leaving a black mark. The girl twisted her head towards the balcony.

‘I’m so tired of you’.

Carmen left the studio and went to her room to dress up: a light coat and a scarf over the old blue dress she wore for painting. She walked down the street, cursing and smoking. Once she arrived at El Mercado de San Miguel, she bought everything she could think of: fresh tomatoes, pomegranate, vinegar anchovies, mussels in tomato sauce, figs, goat cheese, olive jam, three loaves of bread, ham, sugar coated cherries, garlic, fine herbs salami, chorizo and lemon cream. Returning home, up the street, was hard work. She had sweat pouring from everywhere, her coat was heavy on her shoulders and her scarf pulled her skin as though a wild animal was biting her. She drank a glass of Tempranillo as soon as she reached her kitchen. Then she organised the food in dishes and bowls. She opened the living room curtains. They only used that space when Pedro’s mother and sister visited, the first Sunday of every month – a dreadful event, in which Pedro’s mother would systematically condemn the newest laws passed by the Republican government, while Pedro avoided her gaze, like a good son, too polite to contradict her. Carmen unfolded the velvet tablecloth they only used at Christmas. She brought the vase of withered red carnations from her bedside table to decorate the room.

Carmen sat the girl at the table. She used her silk scarf to tie her hands to the chair, so she couldn’t grab anything. Feeling generous, she decided to ask for the last time.

‘¿Tienes hambre?’

The girl didn’t react.

All the different smells combined in her nostrils, and Carmen felt both hunger and repugnance in front of the feast. Since the surgery, food and sex were all the same to her: a rather boring activity one had to perform more or less frequently in order to be considered healthy. She started licking the sugar-coated cherries, hoping their

sweetness would trick her appetite. Next were the acid anchovies, accompanied by goat cheese and chorizo. Éboli jumped on the table and started chewing the fish, fat drops of oil hanging from her whiskers. Carmen already felt quite full so she licked at the lemon cream to help her swallow the fine herbs salami and the garlic. She looked at the girl while suckling the fat from the ham. She had to be hungry. Carmen bit into the fresh tomatoes, pretending she was not already full. The girl hadn't eaten in two days. Hunger controlled everyone, animals and humans alike. The girl couldn't be any different, but there she was, sitting, looking her right in the eye. Carmen drank more wine, feeling slightly sick. She finished the lemon cream and chewed on the figs and the chocolate truffles. She opened and sucked the pomegranate's insides. The food was heavy on her stomach, piling up and reaching her throat. She unbuttoned her dress: her forehead was sweaty and her cheeks burned.

‘¿No... tienes... hambre?’ Talking was difficult. She forced a slice of bread, covered with olive jam, into her mouth.

The girl didn't blink.

With her stomach beating in painful spasms, Carmen tried to get up, but she couldn't move.

### **Lesson 5: La niña es buena. La niña aprende español. ¿Cómo te llamas, niña?**

Carmen decided to take the girl out for the first time in April. They went to La Institución on a Sunday. Carmen had spent too many hours speaking in Spanish to the girl, writing down the simplest sentences. Sometimes the girl would look at the page, but she never made any effort to take the pen, and when she finally did, she used it to poke the wounds in her arms. However, she knew how to hold it, which meant that, at some point, she had also gone to school.

‘She just doesn't want to, damn her,’ Carmen said to Pedro. ‘Have you seen her arms? She won't stop scratching until the bone shows. No fleas, nothing, just for the sake of it.’

‘I told you to wrap her hands in bandages so she can't scratch. And call the doctor.’

‘Fuck doctors. They put me all upside down for no reason.’

‘They saved your life.’ Pedro put on his jacket before heading to church. When he kissed her, Carmen felt his despair. He thought she was ungrateful.

She tried to get the girl dressed, but all her own clothes were too small and too tight. She took one of Pedro’s shirts, then put a coat over the girl and covered her hair with a handkerchief. She considered covering the girl’s eyes too, as she used to do with Éboli, when she needed to bring her out onto the streets, caged inside a bamboo basket. Like the cat, the girl might panic, or run.

Carmen squeezed the girl’s hand all the way to La Institución, but the girl didn’t seem distressed by the crowds or the noise. She was familiar with large cities. They entered La Institución through the back doors. Being a Sunday, there was no one on the premises, apart from Mauro, the gardener, taking care of the pink oleanders.

In the corridors, the racket of the students had been substituted by the murmur of acacia leaves. The sun created golden pools on the floor. Instead of teenage sweat, Carmen smelled lavender from the garden. It was in those moments that she realised how much she hated people. Loneliness improved every experience. That’s why she liked statues. Their beauty required silent worship. No stupid chatting, no foolish demands.

They entered Carmen’s workshop. The scent of clay and wood powder lingered in the air.

‘Siéntate, sit down.’ Carmen led her to the first row of benches. Then she wrote on the blackboard.

LA NIÑA ES BUENA.

LA NIÑA APRENDE ESPAÑOL.

¿CÓMO TE LLAMAS, NIÑA?

‘Ven, ven y escribe. Come and write for me...’ She copied the first sentence deliberately slow.

‘Here...’

She gave the girl a piece of chalk and, for a change, the girl held it.

‘And now, you write...’ Carmen lit up a cigarette and sat on a bench at the back. The girl rolled the chalk in her fingers and then brought it to the blackboard. She pressed too much and the chalk broke. Dios, sometimes she seemed retarded.

‘I’ll bring you some books. Wait here.’

Carmen left the room. The garden was still awakening on that late April day. Lavender, pomegranate and lilac trees, ivy and yellow jasmine, all bloomed in the sunshine. She sat on a stone bench under the sun and lit another cigarette. She loved that garden. She didn’t know what to do to reach the girl, though. Taking her to the doctor was the only thing left, but there was the risk that they would want to do something weird to her, such as locking her up in an asylum. Compared to that, the girl was better off with that crew of gypsies Carmen had rescued her from.

Carmen got up, went to the small children’s classroom and picked *Cuentos de Perrault* and *El Mundo Maravilloso*. After the surgery, she thought she’d never be interested in such things again. When she retraced her footsteps, the workshop’s door was open. Carmen’s heart jumped to her mouth at the thought that the girl had gone away – forever.

She found her in the garden, beside a young orange tree. Someone kneeled in front of her, like a shepherd worshipping a saint.

It was Mauro, the gardener, looking under the girl’s coat.

‘What the hell are you doing?’

The gardener turned and stood up, but he didn’t seem ashamed.

‘Sorry, Señora, I found this girl in the garden. Must be a beggar.’

Carmen realised he didn’t know they were together.

‘Take your filthy hands off her, you bastard. I’m going to tell the principal about this.’

‘What? She’s just a beggar... I was just trying to ask her...’ Mauro said.

‘Go away,’ Carmen threw one of the books at him. ‘Go away, go away,’ she kept shouting.

‘I did nothing, Señora...’

‘Go away.’

The gardener left.

The girl pulled a tiny green orange from the tree.

### **Lesson 6: Mujer, hombre, pechos, vagina**

Her moan was unexpected, water spouting out from sterile rocks.

‘Are you...?’ Pedro gasped.

Carmen untangled her body from his. Cold air rushed through her lungs and relieved the burning between her thighs. She let her body expand, free, on the mattress. Her stomach growled. No matter how hungry she felt, thinking about food nauseated her. Painful echoes in her belly reminded her of how empty she was, below. Nothing could fill the space. The dense fog of tobacco smoke did the trick, though. She wanted to turn into a ghost: beyond flesh and body. Like the girl. She sensed the girl was in the room with them, too. Somewhere. That moan she’d heard a minute ago – it had to be the girl.

‘You alright...?’ Pedro murmured.

‘Don’t touch me.’ Carmen sat on the bed, cross-legged. She didn’t mind being naked in front of the girl. After the long evenings posing in the studio, nudity was what they shared. But in front of Pedro, she felt disgust for her withered skin, her dry sex. She shouldn’t have taken Pedro’s hand earlier that night to place it on her lap. She couldn’t stop thinking about Mauro kneeling in front of the girl, peeking under her skirt... She thought she needed to be touched again, but the need was all gone. Like the memories from childhood, sex was something she knew had been agreeable once, but now seemed unreal.

‘Carmen, I wanted to do this. You wanted to, too,’ Pedro said.

‘I... it’s disgusting, everything is... dead. Wrong.’

‘You’re beautiful,’ he whispered, kissing her naked shoulder.

Carmen smelled his onion-soaked sweat.

‘Today I took her out...’ Carmen said.

‘You mean...?’

‘Yes.’

‘No way.’

Carmen reached for her mother of pearl box under the pillow. She wondered where the girl was hiding. The wardrobe?

‘Not now...’ he complained.

She lit one of the cigarettes.

‘Dios, Carmen, did anyone else see her? La señora de Rabadán? You promised me we’d take her to the nuns after you’re done with the statue.’

As always, Pedro cared only about appearances.

‘I brought her to La Institución.’ Carmen sucked her cigarette to quiet her stomach.

‘Did Yebra—?’

‘It’s Sunday. Your dear friend, Yebra, was not there.’

Don Alonso Yebra ran La Institución. His expertise lay in Philosophy and Latin, nothing to do with Pedro’s meteorological science. He said that Yebra was like a father, but they behaved more like a pair of annoying teenagers.

‘There was this gardener, Mauro, you know him, right? He tried to touch her, in a bad way... Dios, that’s the first thing mothers teach their daughters. The woods, the bad wolf... Snow White, right? Wait, was it Red Riding Hood?’

‘She’s not your daughter. We don’t know who she is, or where she comes from...’

‘I know... I know.’ Perhaps the girl was behind the door. How or when she had got there, Carmen had no idea.

‘She needs a doctor,’ Pedro stated.

Carmen sighed.

‘I want you to take her.’

She didn’t reply.

Pedro slung his gown over his shoulders and walked out of the room.

Carmen waited until she heard the door to Pedro’s room closing. Then, she checked under the bed. The girl was there.

‘You don’t need to be scared.’ The girl climbed onto the bed and curled in a corner, just like Éboli, who was at her feet.

‘I know you’ve also been thinking about the gardener,’ Carmen whispered in her ear. ‘And now we’ve scared you. But you’re a mujer, cariño. You need to know about these things.’

Carmen put her hands on the girl’s breasts. They were like small apples under the flannel. The girl was docile as a piece of clay between her hands.

‘Pechos...’ Carmen reached between the girl’s legs. ‘And you also have a vagina...’ After the illness, her vagina had turned into a piece of fabric stitched to her body. It didn’t even have a smell of its own anymore.

The girl started munching on her hands, wrapped in cotton strips.

‘It’s okay, it’s okay, cariño...’ Carmen held the girl’s warm body closer. Cheek to cheek. Legs interlaced. Having Pedro inside her had felt painful and wrong. The girl’s skin smelled like rain, and it was softer than his.

### **Lesson 7: Para, sobrino**

Next Monday morning, Carmen woke to find the house in silence. Pedro was taking water samples from the river Manzanares with his students, and Josefa had a free day. The sun coming from the kitchen’s window gave Carmen a headache. She forced a glass of water down her throat whilst looking at the last sketches of the girl. Something was missing, and until she found it she couldn’t start making the first models in clay. It was a very hot spring: another dry year, which didn’t precisely support Pedro’s theory that the future held a torrent of never ending rains.

When she came back to the room, the girl was standing on the bed, looking at the wooden crucifix hanging on the wall. Her fingers caressed the carved edges and the beautiful thighs of the agonised Jesus.

‘Do you like it?’ Carmen opened the doors to the balcony. ‘The only thing I brought from Menorca. It was my mother’s. I thought I could sell it, she treated it like it was made of gold, but... His face reminds me of all the shit I left behind.’ Carmen

put on a red flowered kimono and sat at her dressing table. She watched the girl in the mirror. 'Para... You're going to drop it.' She threw a hairbrush at the girl.

Carmen frowned at the yellowish patches on her own face. The peach-coloured freckle on her temple seemed to be turning into a wart and, without her painted eyebrows, her eyes resembled two dirty holes. Three thick hairs grew on her chin. Violet veins covered her nose. She raised a hand and touched the lump of flesh hanging loosely on her neck...

A soft meow. Éboli had entered the room. Carmen picked her up and sniffed her odourless fur.

The girl approached them, studying the toiletries spread out on the table. Carmen had never been that interested in make-up, but now she had to make sure she looked like a woman. The sun entering from the balcony bleached the girl's skin whiter, and her blond hair glowed as if she wore a saint's halo. The girl opened a jar of scarlet lip paint and dug her index finger into it.

'You don't need that... ' Carmen swept the bottles and jars to the floor. The aroma of lavender drifted up to poison the air. Éboli jumped off her lap.

'Being a mujer is a hassle, cariño. And dangerous.'

Yes, they said things were changing fast, and women would be able to vote in the next municipal elections, at the end of the month. Yet, if Carmen could have chosen, she would have been a man. No vacuum to fill inside. No waiting for freedom and privileges.

She opened Pedro's side of the wardrobe and took out one of his suits and a white shirt. She searched through the drawers to find a belt and braces. The girl arranged the clothes on the bed to make a human shape.

'That's it. You can be whoever you want to be, can't you? Sit, here, on the corner... put on the shirt...'

The girl took the sleeveless shirt and passed it around her neck over her nightgown.

'No, no. Come, let me.'

Carmen unbuttoned the dress. The girl's ribs were no longer visible. She had peach nipples and a line of black fur down her stomach. She was an exotic creature.

Her waist was wide, so the trousers didn't look bad on her, once Carmen adjusted the belt.

The girl scratched the satin on the waistcoat and licked the buttons on the jacket's sleeve. She was tall enough to be a young man. The white skin and the absence of thick facial hair had an easy explanation: he was a foreigner from the North.

'Aren't you the prettiest thing...?' Carmen said, taking the girl's face in her hands. The girl's cheeks blushed apple red. The broken nose added some roughness, like the thick trail of blond hairs on her virgin lips. Carme tried to remember if, when Pedro was younger, his skin had been that fresh. She had felt a similar vigour when they kissed, under the old apple tree in La Institución's garden.

'I'm going to call you Ciarán. Like the Irish saint.'

The girl played with the belt's buckle.

'Ciarán, Ciarán... You're my sobrino... the only son of my older sister who...'  
Carmen sat on her dresser stool and picked up a jar from the floor. '...went away, to Ireland, and married there, but now... she's ill, she's dead in fact, what a pity. That's why I brought Ciarán to live with me.' The girl dug her pinky into the ivory foundation and licked it. 'You're still too young, too innocent. You need me, don't you?'

Ciarán smiled and moved to caress Éboli on the armchair.

### **Lesson 8: El Jardín de las Delicias, tranquilo, ¿qué te pasa?**

Carmen walked down El Paseo del Prado holding Ciarán's arm. The sun filtering in, through the poplars and acacia trees, made her sneeze. She shook the yellow acacia seeds from her dress. Summer was a messy explosion. Pigeons crowding in the fountains along the Paseo, children chasing the pigeons, mothers chasing the children, pushing trolleys that scratched the cobblestones. Artists sold watercolours of this scene, which smelled of apples, pigeon droppings, sweet moscatel wine and the stagnant water of nearby ponds. Carmen needed a quiet, wintery place. She headed

towards El Museo del Prado, stopping to let Ciarán admire the cleanliness of the Doric pillars and marbled portico at the entrance.

‘You know who’s the man sitting there?’ Carmen pointed out a sculpture on a high pedestal.

Ciarán held a hand above his eyes.

‘It’s Velázquez, he was the king’s painter. Come.’

Inside, the chilly air tasted of dust and ancient oils. They rushed through an empty corridor. People preferred sitting on the Jerónimos hill outside, where their apples and moscatel wine attracted wasps and red ants. Ciarán jumped to step only on the black tiles. Carmen laughed and pushed him.

They entered a domed room on the ground floor. Nine Classical Greek statues were disposed in a circle. Some of them didn’t have heads, and many had lost their delicate hands. The wrinkles in their light tunics were still perfect, though. Carmen caressed a delightful kneecap. Ciarán remained on the threshold. He looked at the amputated figures with apprehension, as if they were patients from a hospital room.

‘Want to see something colourful?’

Ciarán’s eyes said yes. Since Carmen had named him, communication was easier. With a backstory connecting them – he was Ciarán, her nephew – she felt closer to him. He was still getting used to Madrid and the Spanish language, but that was something she could relate to. Carmen had arrived in the capital at nineteen, after having spent all her life on the remote Mediterranean island of Menorca speaking Menorquín. She found the metropolis artificial, aggressive, predatory. At first, she had wandered through El Retiro Park, hoping to find some relief in nature, but the pickpockets and perverts hiding behind the bushes scared her. El Museo del Prado had been her refuge. There she had discovered a picture that mirrored everything she felt inside, a piece of art that screamed chaos and life.

She and Ciarán stood in front of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, the only painting on the yellowish wall. Carmen wanted to explain to him that the triptych depicted the journey of humanity through Paradise, Earth and Hell.

‘El Jardín de las Delicias,’ she said.

Ciarán let her hand go and approached the central image in the canvas. At first, his face was calm as a pond, eyes slightly absent, but soon, waves of emotion wrinkled his skin. He narrowed his eyes, drew his blond eyebrows together and pursed his lips so hard they turned whiter than his skin. His body shrank, he started trembling. He pressed both hands to his mouth. His scars were almost healed, but Carmen could hear him biting at the scabs. His face turned red and his eyes were like two overfilled glasses.

‘What...’ She rushed to hold him, certain he was about to fall into pieces. Luckily no one was around. ‘Tranquilo... tranquilo... ¿qué te pasa? ¿Qué te pasa?’

Ciarán started moaning and his cries bounced off the walls. Someone was going to come and ask them to leave.

‘Tranquilo...’ Carmen pressed a hand against his mouth as hard as she could. ‘Tranquilo.’

While holding the boy, she tried to work out what disturbed him. It was something in the central part of the triptych, the scene that depicted a carnivalesque parade running along a pond. Naked people rode on all sort of animals, from deer to dromedaries. The fearsome thing was among them, in the centre, huddled down. Pink.

The bull.

‘We’ll go now, we’ll go...’ Carmen couldn’t even remember the animal being in El Bosco’s piece. Ciarán had stopped trembling. She let him breathe. His cheeks glittered with tears but his eyes were not a sea tempest anymore. He returned to the painting and touched the pink bull with his raw fingertips.

‘El Toro está aquí,’ he said.

## SAINT CIARÁN OF THE BLESSED BULL

1934-1935

### A Glossary of Words

Carmen says I have the stupid Spanish of a child. To improve, I'm going to learn a difficult word from the dictionary every day and then, when I'm all done, I'll show her.

#### Araña

This is an insect of eight legs and a body that, sometimes, has the form of a pear. Other times the body is a dot and the legs thin and long, like the filaments of a tiny flower. Here, spiders are so small. When I see them in the corners, I let them be. If Carmen sees them, though, she squashes them with the heel of her shoe and says, 'bicho asqueroso', which means 'disgusting bug'.

But an 'araña' can also be an enormous lamp. I know this because yesterday Carmen took me to La Institución's great hall to see the play her students have been preparing for months. There were other professors sitting next to us in the red velvet chairs. Some of them looked excited but Carmen whispered, 'This play is pure nonsense, I hate it.' And then, 'I taught the girls how to do masks from papier-mâché but they are so ugly.'

The play began. A woman with hair in a silver bun had given me a flier. The title of the play was: 'Eresición de Tesalia y su hija.' The girls appeared on a stage that was poorly lit. Some of them wore the ugly masks. Others were dressed as trees, and then someone was cutting all these trees. I didn't understand anything. Carmen got bored after a while.

'Do you know the only beautiful thing here?' She pointed up to the ceiling, where there was an immense lamp made of thousands of tiny glasses hanging from a golden skeleton. 'The araña. Is it not sublime? And they didn't even bother to switch it on.'

I looked at the araña again and I imagined that its golden arms were spider's legs and the glasses were raindrops.

### **Botarate**

This is what Carmen says to her schoolgirls when she's marking their sketches, or going around the sawdust-covered worktops. It means that the person in front of her could have done much better.

Carmen brings me to her class and wraps me in a white cloth that has a lot of wrinkles – because wrinkles are difficult, that's what she said while showing me one of the most famous statues ever, the Pietà from Michelangelo. I stay still. I'm very good at leaving my body and looking at it from the outside. Her students have an hour to sketch me. Sometimes I wink an eye at the girls and they giggle. They think I'm pretty. Once I heard them saying I was 'guapo', which means 'a beautiful boy'. But when Carmen goes down the platform, the schoolgirls stop whispering, and they look down with tightened shoulders. This is what Carmen says to them:

'Does this look human to you? Surely you've seen enough humans during your life to know what I mean...'

'This has no depth. How are you going to carve it?'

She allows the best students to experiment with clay, but the results horrify her.

'Even a three-year-old kid can do better with mud from the garden... How can I let you use stone?'

'Do you think that carving marble allows any mistake? None of you deserve stone. At all.'

I know she's secretly happy none of the schoolgirls can make me right. I pose for her alone in the evenings, no clothes on. She has lots of clay figurines of myself, and has carved some on alabaster, too. She will start the real statue when they send the marble. It's coming from Carrara. That's in Italy.

She smiles at me while she breathes deeply, finishing the piece.

'Now, this is it. You're not easy, cariño, but this is it.'

She's no botarate.

### **Cielo**

'Cielo' is above us and has a vivid blue colour every day. Sometimes there are clouds, but they are very white because sunlight soaks everything here. I can see the cielo from the library's window. When I want to sleep alone, I come back to the library. I look at the distant blue mountains, trying to remember what life was like before Carmen and before Madrid, but nothing comes. This makes me sad. The library smells of dust and dried leaves. I pick up books. Before, I used to look just for pictures, because even when I understood the small letters, reading was like untangling a messy ball of yarn. Now, I never get bored. I don't think Carmen is going to like this. I was supposed to complete all the Spanish exercises, but instead I'm writing all these things that have nothing to do with cielo anymore.

### **Churro**

On Saturdays we go to drink hot chocolate with churros at San Ginés. 'Churros' are sticks of dough fried in olive oil and coated with sugar.

'You'll sleep in on Sunday' Carmen says whilst she drags me out of her bed. (Pedro didn't like me sleeping here but Carmen shouted at him and now I can be here whenever I want). I don't even have time to wipe the sleep from my eyes because soon we're on streets which are empty but already bathed in warm sun. Carmen dresses nice – a skirt, a pink blouse, a hat and her brown high-heels, the ones which make 'click-clack' when she walks. I wear a blue jacket and matching trousers, and Pedro's old fedora hat. He doesn't wear it because he doesn't like the colour. Too bright, he says. Carmen takes my arm and when we arrive at La Plaza Mayor she stops to buy the newspaper and light her first cigarette of the day. In San Ginés, she orders two hot chocolates and two sets of churros. She hands me new Spanish exercises or lets me work on this dictionary. I drink my chocolate while it's still boiling and eat the churros quickly, but she takes her time. There is this little jar with a tiny dune of sugar inside. She leaves it while she decides she doesn't want churros

anyways – so I can have extra – and drinks her chocolate in noisy sips. Sometimes she cuts one page off the newspaper and hands it to me:

‘Read this and learn about Spain...’ she says. Today’s article was all about Juanita Rico Hernández, the girl that was killed in a shooting because she was a socialist.

When she’s done with the newspaper, she takes the little jar and pours the sugar down her throat, as if it was liquid. She closes her eyes like a gecko enjoying an August evening.

### **De rechupete**

Pedro’s mother said that once. I didn’t know what she meant. I asked Carmen but she said ‘later, later.’ She doesn’t enjoy Pedro’s mother and sister coming here for lunch. This happens the first Sunday of the month. Carmen complains when she has to spend her Sunday morning in the kitchen.

‘It’s your family, you should cook...’ she shouts at Pedro, who is behind her, tidying all her mess and doing most of the cooking anyways. ‘You know, before the hospital I might have cared about your mother expecting me to cook for you all, but now I don’t give a shit...’

‘You shouldn’t have got rid of Josefa,’ he complains. ‘We need a maid.’

(I know why Josefa left. Carmen didn’t like the way she looked at me.)

Pedro’s mother and sister always dress in black, because Pedro’s father died ten years ago and that’s the rule. As soon as they enter, I have to be there, grabbing their shawls and coats, or Pedro’s mother would start moaning about me being ungrateful, considering they took me into their home just because I’m Carmen’s nephew.

So we were at the table eating cocido with soup and chickpeas, and Carmen was drinking Tempranillo wine and complaining about La Institución, and Pedro was explaining how the world will sink in two hundred years, and then Pedro’s mother burped.

‘Está de rechupete,’ she said.

This means that something is so delicious that you would lick the plate, and possibly your fingers too.

### **Embeber**

I thought this meant ‘to drink’ because it’s similar to ‘beber’. We ‘bebemos’ a lot of coffee during the day. Carmen ‘bebe’ Tempranillo when she arrives home from La Institución.

‘I needed that,’ she says after the first sip.

She keeps the glass close when she studies the stone.

‘See this?’ she told me the day they brought the block of marble. ‘You’re inside this rock and I’m going to find you.’

Pedro, on the other hand, prefers Jerez liquor. It has the colour of caramel and tastes sweeter. He drinks it at night, while he reads the Bible. Today I asked Carmen if I could ‘embeber’ Jerez too. She laughed and said there was another bottle in the pantry but that ‘embeber’ meant something different.

‘It’s when you’re very focused on something... like when you’re writing the dictionary and I call you and you don’t even hear me because you’re focused on filling the page. You’re “embebido.”’

Inside the pantry, I poured Jerez into a coffee mug and tasted the burning liquid. Liquor helps me to sleep. It feels wrong sometimes, though, as if in a past life someone had warned me about the dangers of alcohol. There were women dressing in black and white. I used to live with them, I think.

I have tried to remember. Sometimes, when I’m about to fall asleep, I hear the waves, and the bed moves up and down, like a boat. And there is this strong smell: rotten eggs, shit and wet straw. El Toro is waiting for me behind the bedroom door. Cold sweat drips down my nape. I can’t move.

Last night I went to the bed but Carmen was not there. These days she spends nights at the studio. The block of stone has no human shape yet, she’s just carving a bit here and there. She usually wears her dressing gown open so I can see her big breasts oscillate when she leans on the marble.

Her skin is the colour of baked clay. Her body is soft and smells of rose hip syrup. Her hips are wide and welcoming. Her hands and feet are small, but with such minuscule details: knuckles, pink nails. I want to kiss her knee pits.

She puts olive oil in her hair, so it's bright and softer than silk.

### **Finflón**

I was walking down Calle Preciados with Carmen. I had my new suit on despite the heat – it is black with tiny white stripes – sweat running down my cheeks, like tears.

‘Finflón!’ a group of school children shouted at me. Kids with loose teeth and black, bruised knees.

‘Finflón, finflón!’

‘Fuera de aquí, carajo!’ Carmen cursed at them.

I asked her if ‘finflón’ was something bad and she just chuckled.

‘Come, mira...’ She took me to El Corte Inglés, the small tailor shop where I got my black suit, so I could see my own reflection in the store window.

‘See?’ Carmen said. ‘You’re all blond and red, your face is like a warm loaf of bread. That’s finflón.’ She laughed.

Here, everyone has black eyes and dark hair and their skin is not the colour of lumpy milk like mine, but a vivid flesh hue. Carmen says it’s because I came from an island very far away. She says it’s called ‘Irlanda.’

### **Gentileza**

This means that someone paid you money to do something you like anyway.

‘It’s only for the money that I’m teaching all these dumb asses.’ Carmen complains about her job at La Institución almost every day. ‘Working, what do you know about it, huh? You haven’t worked in your whole fucking life. Why would you do so? You have me here, providing for you...’

But then she regrets screaming at me and hugs me, and kisses me.

‘You’re too young to work... you’re too naïve for the world. You’re just mine.’

The other day Reme came from Barcelona. Reme is a painter and Carmen's friend from the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts. Her eyes are like hot coals and her voice resounds all over the apartment like a storm.

'Ciarán, is Carmen treating you well?' She winked at me and offered me a cigarette. Her hair was long and thick and smelled of camomile.

'Can I see your sketchbook?' I asked her.

She smiled and said:

'A sketchbook is very private. But I'll share it with you later.'

Whenever Reme is around, the house fills up with laughter and Carmen doesn't curse as much. Even Pedro stops reading his Bible and his science books and we all go to the river Manzanares to have a picnic.

Yesterday Carmen and Reme sat on the studio's balcony, a cloud of blue smoke above their heads, chatting. They passed me their cigarettes now and again but mostly they ignored me. Reme had Éboli on her lap and a pad on top of her. She was drawing without looking at it. She was sketching us (Carmen and me) sitting in front of her.

'Where is Irlanda?' I asked them.

'Look it up in the atlas,' Carmen replied.

'It's up north, in the Atlantic ocean. They call it the 'Emerald Isle,' Reme said.

'Have you ever been there?' I asked.

'No, but I have been to Paris...'

'Go look it up in the atlas, Ciarán,' Carmen said. 'What do you think?' She asked Reme about the stone.

'Is it true that this is for gentileza of the Irish College at Salamanca?'

'Yes, they're paying quite a bit. Pedro's friends with Miguel de Unamuno, you know. So I got recommended. It has to be done next year, but I told them I'll probably take longer. Unless the angels come to work for me, that is.'

'Funny they want to give the commission to the biggest atheist in Madrid.'

'Reme, please. This is not about religion.'

'When was the last time someone dragged you to mass? Before you had teeth to bite them back?'

‘No, you don’t get me,’ Carmen said, laughing. ‘Do you think about religion when you see Bernini’s Ecstasy of Saint Teresa?’

Reme stopped sketching and drew on her cigarette, blowing out a draft of smoke.

‘It’s the most brilliant representation of the female orgasm, don’t you think so?’ Carmen added.

### **Holganza**

Carmen says it is ‘holganza’, which means that we’ll have fun, but I don’t believe her. I don’t want to go. She’s angry at me because I’m afraid of El Toro. That monster. It follows me everywhere I go, lurking from all the dark corners. If I drink Jerez liquor before I go to sleep it stays away, but its smell never leaves me. Carmen wants to bring me closer to El Toro. It’s all because of the sculpture. She wants to carve me riding El Toro. That’s why she’s bringing me to a bullfighting ring.

I don’t want to go. I don’t want to. I don’t want to.

Last night I shouted at Carmen but she shouted back and she said she’s dragging me all the way to La Plaza de Manzanares if need be. Even Pedro came out of his room and I thought he was going to save me.

‘Can you both keep the noise down? I’m reading,’ he said.

‘I won’t go,’ I said.

‘Carmen?’ He pointed at her with his book. ‘You said just until the commission is done.’

‘I need a bull to finish the statue.’

‘Ciarán is terrified,’ Pedro said.

‘So what? He needs to get over it. And it’s for the statue.’

‘Until the commission is done, you hear me? Then all this nonsense is over.’

Pedro went back to his room and slammed the door.

He didn’t even look at me or speak to me. He never does. I’m less than a shadow to him.

I don’t want to go.

Carmen keeps saying, ‘It’s for your own good, cariño. You’ll thank me later.’

I’ve taken the cross-necklace that hangs from Carmen’s bed frame.

I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go.

### **Invertido**

I have to write this. I don’t mind if Carmen reads it afterwards but I have to write this.

The bullfighting happened at La Plaza de Manzanares on the 11th of August.

Beasts and burning sun. The venue was crowded. Burnt oil, caramel-coated almonds and Moscatel wine. Carmen got me some almonds but I couldn’t open my mouth. Sitting next to her on the terrace, I closed my eyes, trying to forget who I was or where I was. I could pretend I was asleep until everything was done. I imagined the moments afterwards, the sun with all its flames away behind the mountains. The healing night and me back at home. I felt the cross-necklace stabbing my palm. It made me feel better. Something to hold onto. It reminded me of home, before Madrid.

‘Hombre, Carmen.’

‘Bergamín, how are you?’ Carmen’s voice.

‘Excited for the evening. You and the old men from the Institución? And the husband? Wait, who’s this boy?’

I opened one eye. In front of us, there was a young man: pelican-face and glossy hair parted on the right.

‘Pedro is at home, you know what he thinks of bullfighting. And this is Ciarán, my nephew.’

‘Look at those golden locks, didn’t know you had such an exotic—’

‘My older sister. She passed away, in Ireland, very sad.’ Carmen waved her fan. Her make-up was starting to melt. ‘It’s his first time. Thanks for the tickets.’

‘Then he’s a lucky boy. Don Ignacio is the bullfighter today, never thought he would be back in the arena, and yet... he’s been making history this season. I had tickets for Federico but he’s still up north with La Barraca, theatre stuff, you know how it is...’

A woman dressed in white passed by us.

‘Pardon me,’ she mumbled, looking at me with dark, bulging eyes. She gave me a quick smile.

Carmen and José Bergamín went silent as the dead.

‘I heard Federico cannot stand being in the same place as Encarna...’ Carmen whispered, and I could see she was looking down the lower tiers, where the woman in white was sitting.

‘Yeah, well, Don Ignacio is a real Spanish gentleman, but it’s getting a bit expensive for him to keep both the wife and Encarna. And talking about Encarnita, she’s driving everyone crazy, not just Federico.’

‘Who is Federico?’ I asked.

‘Ha. Didn’t you tell your Irish nephew about Spain’s finest poet?’

‘Hush, José. Ciarán doesn’t need to get involved with that bunch.’

‘Wait, am I not one of that bunch? You offend me...’

‘You are another real Spanish gentleman, José.’ Carmen smiled. Then she turned to me. ‘You need to stay away from Federico, hear me?’

I was feeling a bit sick. The heat and the fear.

‘He’s an invertido.’

‘What?’

‘He likes other men. In a loving way, I mean.’

### **Jolgorio**

The library, where I’m writing now, is quiet, but I can still hear the enormous ‘jolgorio’ in the arena when the show started. Jolgorio includes screams, drunk songs, people hitting the floor with their feet, and women shouting that they sell cider. The bullfighting started. I didn’t want to watch.

‘Don’t close your eyes.’ Carmen sank her nails into my arm. It hurt, but not as much as my heart, threatening to explode inside my chest.

‘Yeah you don’t want to miss anything, chico, I’m telling you, there’s no bullfighter like Don Ignacio,’ José added.

First, some lancers came out, sitting on the horses straight as sticks. Then, a group of men wearing golden suits of lights, the matadores, came, carrying their red capes folded. Just one of them dressed in glittering blue.

‘Don Ignacio, there he goes.’ José clapped when the blue matador walked to the side. ‘What an artist.’

People shouted at them, asking for challenges, blood, danger.

El Toro appeared.

I started crying so hard that I couldn’t breathe. The smell came back again. Boiling tarmac. Half-digested beef. I was so afraid my body would switch off. That it’d go numb, and my mind would get lost in an endless limbo. Yes, I know what limbo is. It’s the place where thousands of babies wait. Unbaptised babies. And children. And all sorts of crying creatures.

‘Take it easy... what’s the matter?’ Carmen said. ‘See, it’s very far away, don’t you see? Look, look at that horseman... he’s going to stab the bull, so it won’t be too fierce... see? It’s okay, the bull can die, it’s not a monster, it’s...’

But I couldn’t possibly look. I swear.

### **Kiosko**

‘Chico, why are you so scared?’ José asked.

‘Go and get some Moscatel, por Dios. It’ll do you good,’ Carmen ordered, putting the money in my hand. The jolgorio followed me until the closest ‘kiosko’ – which is the portable shop where they sell wine and sweets. There was a woman inside, with a Manila shawl on her shoulders despite the heat. Rotten apples and green pulp were everywhere in the stand. She sold cider. The apple scent was somehow familiar and it calmed my sickness. Cattle eat apples during the winter months, I remembered. Horses neighed behind my back and the crowd screamed.

‘OLÉ’

I came back to Carmen and José with my eyes fixed on the ground and tears pouring down into the glass of cider.

**Lauréola**

‘OLÉ.’

The crowd screamed again. El Toro could barely move, pink stakes hanging from his flesh- Pools of blood all over the arena. Don Ignacio showed him the red cape one more time. El Toro charged but in the last moment he stumbled. Don Ignacio twisted and sank a silver sword into El Toro’s neck.

‘OLÉ’.

The crowd applauded.

‘Olé Don Ignacio!’ José stood up.

I couldn’t take my eyes from the scene. El Toro was still standing, muzzle dripping red. A dark and cursed beast. He was the horror, yes, but not the origin of that horror. He was nothing but a mirror, a reflection of the crowd, the smiles and the cheers and the screams and the joy of those who watch pain and are amused by it.

El Toro stood, his horns like crescent moons.

‘OLÉ’.

Don Ignacio approached a second time, a new sword in his hand.

El Toro’s legs trembled, his body glittering in sweat and blood. He charged one more time.

Don Ignacio aimed at El Toro’s chest.

El Toro fell to the ground, the first sword sticking out his body.

He dragged the matador down with him.

Dust and shiny clothes.

Don Ignacio threw the sword away and tried to get up.

El Toro sank his horn in the matador’s thigh.

Blood rained.

Hanging on the horns, the matador shivered like a scarecrow.

People howled.

Blades in hand, the riders and the other matadores came running, poking El Toro until he let go.

And fell.

‘OLÉ’.

I could feel thousands of cold metal teeth biting inside my guts.

People ovationed the matadores.

‘OLÉ’.

White clothed nurses ran into the ring carrying a stretcher.

El Toro lay in a puddle of blood.

And then, I saw it.

Bright.

Clear.

A rush of fresh air cutting out the poisoned atmosphere. ‘Lauréola’, a soft light that lingered around El Toro for seconds and then dissipated.

I knew it.

I got up and ran down the grades, my hand clenching round the cider glass.

No one saw me.

Not even Carmen.

Down in the arena, I ran towards El Toro.

‘Chico, chico... what are you doing?’ One of the matadores followed me.

I kneeled down next to the monster.

‘Chico, go away, it’s—’

El Toro’s eyes were still open, framed by thick lashes.

*AO come here, bring your golden cattle, bring the sun, the moon, and all the beautiful things you have created...* (Strange words poured down my lips, spoken in mysterious tongues, like an incantation).

I opened his sticky muzzle with my fingers and poured the cider down.

His sudden breath felt like fire in my hands.

### **Lloradera**

Carmen is still crying today. I have never seen her like that, howling, saying she thought I was going to die. Yet I want to remember everything that happened, and I don’t mind who reads this.

As soon as I poured the cider inside El Toro's muzzle, he growled and got up on his four legs, shaking. His wounds kept bleeding and his left horn was garnet, but the rage was gone. A matador dragged me back.

'Chico, ¿estás loco? It'll kill you!'

They took me to the narrow infirmary of the bullring, where the doctors were trying to sew up Don Ignacio, the wounded matador. It smelled of raw fish in there. I looked at Don Ignacio.

The same silver eyes of El Toro.

I still had some drops of cider. I offered him the cup.

He shook his head and turned his grey-skinned face to the other side.

He also knew it.

El Toro was alive so he had to die.

Carmen keeps crying. She has been crying so much that the colour has washed away from her face and her features are about to disappear. She's like a wooden statue that has been way too long in a cellar, devoured by mould and termites. I don't recognise her. It doesn't make sense. What a 'lloradera', a storm of tears. Just a moment ago, I had to take her in my arms, my cheek on her cheek, to calm her. Carmen is becoming little and weak.

She also told me that they didn't dare to kill El Toro again. They took him back to his ranch in Ayala and let him graze, still covered in blood.

Red drops hanging on the olive trees, and a scent of carrion under the violet twilight.

## **Mujer**

'Mujer' means 'woman' but it's a word that I don't like. It confuses me. What is a mujer?

I scrutinise my body when I am alone in the bathtub. I can hide my breasts in my hands. My belly is soft. I have dark curly hair growing all over my thighs and my hips and if I comb them with my fingers I can feel the warm, purple labia. The same dark hair grows under my armpits, but it smells different there, like moss.

What is a mujer? Is it the opposite of man?

Carmen is a mujer.

But she says, 'I'm not a mujer.'

Or, 'There is nothing left inside. No mujer, either.'

Carmen has big breasts with sweet pink nipples. Her body is warm when she sleeps by my side and I like to rest my head in the gap between her neck and shoulders. It smells like home, a bit like baked bread, but more subtle. When Carmen leaves her used lingerie in the room, I sniff it. Women smell nicer than men, they say.

But Carmen is not a mujer, because she smells of cigarettes and speaks over Pedro all the time.

'Show some respect to your husband,' Pedro's mother said to Carmen once.

She said this whispering, but her eyes were bright with angry sparks.

Instead of answering, Carmen smirked.

Pedro's mother hit the table with her spoon. She wanted to smack Carmen in the face. Men hit their women when they don't behave, Carmen told me. For instance, Señora de Rabadán, our neighbour downstairs, the one with nine children, she always has fresh bruises on her face.

'If Pedro ever raised his hand against me, like that Rabadán bastard, I would get the kitchen knife and kill him in his sleep,' Carmen told me.

But I know Pedro would never hit Carmen.

Is Pedro a man?

Sometimes, while she smokes, Carmen places her hand on her belly, like pregnant women do. But Carmen doesn't have a baby inside, just a knotty scar on the outside that goes from the belly button to her vagina.

She says they took everything out and now she's soulless.

I was soulless, too.

I'm remembering now, bit by bit. I remember the women in black and white who taught me about Dios and the world. That must have been back in Ireland, the Emerald Island. I know they were nuns, and I was, too.

But now, I can be anything I want.

## Nequicia

I have been thinking about this so much. Am I able to do any ‘nequicia’? Something bad, wrong. Against Carmen.

Am I able to hurt her?

Carmen is everything to me. She’s transferring my soul to her piece of marble. She says she’s making me immortal. But she doesn’t look at me anymore. She doesn’t speak to me. She just has eyes for the stone and everything else annoys her.

I can’t betray her.

## Ñiquiñaque

‘It’s not just a ñiquiñaque, you know’.

There was a man with glossy hair and smart rat eyes sitting in Carmen’s office when I went there to change the white cloth for my white suit. I had been posing for Carmen’s third year students for two hours and now I had some spare time.

‘Ñiquiñaque’ means something stupid, insubstantial.

‘Who are you?’ I put the striped jacket over my shoulders and walked towards the man, cornering him against the door.

‘Federico. I’m sure Carmen told you about me.’

‘Yes.’

I remembered her warnings.

‘I’m here to talk to you. I came all the way from Santander. For Ignacio.’

‘Who?’

‘Ignacio Sánchez Mejías. The matador. He died last week.’

His voice sounded dry, like an oak tree broken after a storm.

‘I don’t know him. Go away.’

‘How sweet. I bet Carmen told you very nice things about me.’

‘She’ll be back soon.’

‘Are you scared?’

‘No, but Carmen will get anno—’

‘They told me you didn’t seem scared when you went down there and revived the bull.’

I pushed him towards the door. He smelled of leather.

‘The bull killed my friend,’ he said.

I stopped. In his silver-rat eyes, there was something real.

‘They don’t call it murder, they say it’s a miracle,’ Federico continued.

‘Miracles aren’t real,’ I said.

Silence.

‘Carmen told you that? She’s carving a statue of Saint Ciarán, isn’t she?’

‘I’m Ciarán,’ I replied.

He smirked. He had purple circles under his eyes and his face was thin. Grief made him older.

‘Saint Ciarán now. You just performed a miracle. What kind of saint are you?’

I didn’t know what to answer.

‘I’m composing a poem for Ignacio,’ he continued. ‘I need details.’

‘Check the newspapers.’

‘I need the truth.’

I left him in the room and went away.

Carmen said he’s dangerous.

### **Obduración**

Federico and I are friends now. We’ve met so many times. He kept coming to La Institución and wouldn’t leave me alone until I spoke to him. Then we bumped into each other in the street. He asked me why I’m always carrying this notebook. I said it was to do Spanish exercises to improve my vocabulary. He asked to see it and in the end, I let him. He read some pages with extreme care.

‘Ciarán, you’re a writer,’ he said.

Now we meet in *La Ballena Alegre* to drink coffee whilst we talk, talk, talk. We talked about El Toro and Ignacio.

‘What do you remember?’ he asked.

‘Silence. When El Toro attacked Ignacio, the jolgorio went dead.’

‘And what else?’

‘The smell. It was like smoke, and inside the infirmary, iodine...’

‘And what else?’

‘Ignacio looked so frail. Like a dove.’

It was so strange going back to that moment. It’s like I have the memory but I can’t see myself in it. I don’t know what made me come so close to El Toro. Giving life back to him. I am still afraid of El Toro. But now, I feel closer to him, because he can die, too. And I can decide to save him or not. El Toro is mortal but I have Dios by my side. Dios is what protected me and what brought me down to the bullfighting ring. Dios is what I remember from before. Dios is in the cross-necklace I wore. Dios is what Pedro talks about, sometimes. A higher intelligence, he says. The only being that can make sense of all this chaos: elections, slaughters, famine, anger... Dios made me feed apple cider to El Toro.

I remember the smell of apples...

‘You know what bullfighting is?’ Federico asked me on another day. ‘It’s a death ritual. Ignacio knew it. That’s why he was there, that day. Death is coming closer. I can see it. El Toro lives and the bullfighter dies. Times are changing.’

And just today, Federico asked me to join his theatre company, La Barraca, but I said no. And now he tells me that it’s ‘obduración’, what I have. No less. This means I’m trying to resist what’s good for myself. He is wrong.

Carmen doesn’t know anything. She’s too busy with her stone – but Federico stabs my eyes with his eyes every time he speaks.

The block of marble now holds something that could be – barely – recognised as a human shape. Carmen works on it every day, and takes hours to clean out each tiny

incision. She is all the time sweating and pale. She has stopped eating. Every time she goes into the studio, Pedro rolls his eyes. I know he hates me.

Obduración. Not doing what's good for oneself.

Federico insisted on so much.

'They tell me you are all the time with Carmen, like her shadow. That's not good. Artists need solitude. I'm an artist too, I know what I'm saying. Leave Carmen alone and then she'll create.'

I looked down.

'You care about her. Do you want to help her?'

Federico thinks I don't want to leave Carmen because I want her happy and her statue finished. But the truth is, I hate Carmen. I'm hating all the evenings when she contemplates the marble, instead of looking at me. I want to turn that stone into dust. I don't care about muses or creation. I want to leave Carmen alone, so her heart craves me and her skin howls for me.

Federico took my hands between his. He walks funny and he's short, but he has beautiful pianist hands.

'Ciarán, you are an artist too. You need to create. I know you feel it. Back then, when you saved El Toro... I bet you saw how all the pieces connected. Everything made sense, at that moment. Right?'

'Yes...'

'I'll bring you out. I'll bring you out to the world. You'll perform more miracles. I know you will. You're Saint Ciarán of the Blessed Bull.'

### **Prístino**

Federico brought me today to meet the people from La Barraca. The theatre company that has been going all over the 'hidden and dirty Spain no one but us wants to see' for three years now. Their members are tired, though. With all the strikes, there is no money coming from the government. Now the actors have to pay for the petrol, the clothing, the staging...

La Barraca was disappointed and sad. It's difficult to bring creative energy to the desolate Spanish villages when the actors are starving. They all wore blue: men had overalls and women dresses with white collars and buttons on the side. And La Barraca's symbol pinned to their chest. A theatre mask on a wheel.

'We artists are like bulls,' Federico talked to them with me at his side. 'We are born in what we believe is an Eden, thinking we are Dios' children. We believe nothing can touch us but the truth is, our destiny is already decided. We are flesh for the rich and the ignorant. Yes, they admire the beauty we create, but at the end beauty is just another monster, and they kill the monsters like they kill bulls in the arena. We are like bulls and our lives have no other purpose than death, while wealth and ignorance cheer and stay alive.'

'Yeah, I'm tired of illiterate peasants spitting at us. All the work for nothing, why do we even bother to go on the road?' a bulky man with sad eyes said.

'When the Republic gives money, then we go. We already work for free, do we have to pay for travel expenses too? And what else?' a young man with glasses and a jet-black moustache added.

'Federico, for you it's easy. Your plays are famous all over the world and you have money,' a woman said. 'But we need to feed ourselves and our families, pay rent...'

'Money? Who is talking about money now?' Federico replied. 'Spain is a diseased body, there are convulsions everywhere. The republic started to kill the old country, and the wages and the landowners telling us what to do, and when. And La Barraca is about a world without wages, without class, without money. It's all about sharing, and knowledge, and looking into every human being. You look into someone else's eyes and you see their soul, and you don't think about money, or violence, or rejection. Art is the answer. For the women, for the invertidos, the artists, the immigrants, the peasants, the students, the travellers, the thinkers, for the ones who believe in Dios but hate all the fat bishops. Art is the only answer now, before death comes calling. Nothing is going to get easier. Did you think this would be a summer holiday, acting and having fun? Art is the only thing that matters now, art is all that will matter in the end.'

Silence.

‘We can’t stop touring now, just because some say the Republic is doomed. We need to keep doing it, village by village, just like before. They need our stories, not the other ones, the horrors and the lies from the politicians. They need to be enlightened, these people, or they won’t ever be more than animals, cows and calves, and beautiful bulls, yes, but their lives will be carnage. Like all of us. We are treated like cattle. But Saint Ciarán is with us. He saved El Toro.’

‘A saint?’

‘Yes, but a real one. Spain is crumbling, and the poor claim flesh, and the rich claim blood, and we have new saints. Not the saints made from wood and wax, covered in blood and the wounds of martyrdom. Real ones. Ciarán can weep for us. He has real tears and has been blessed. He’s come to look out for the underdogs, the forgotten ones. We have to believe in him.’

‘Is he going to turn our water into wine?’

‘Or give us thousands of fish to eat?’

Some laughed, but Federico hushed them.

One of the women walked towards me.

‘You are Ciarán?’ She had the blackest hair, parted in the middle and combed into a messy low bun. Her eyes were sweet liquorice.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Are you a saint, then?’

‘I don’t bleed. I’m not like your Jesucristo,’ I answered. I held her small, cold hands.

She trembled.

‘Isabel,’ Federico said. ‘I know it.’

Then, he looked at La Barraca.

‘The end is close. Shall we do this one last time? For art’s sake.’

He called me a *prístino* saint. I thought ‘*prístino*’ meant clean (all the old statues of saints are mouldy and covered in dust) but *prístino* means ‘primitive’ or ‘original’. Real.

### **Quitamotas**

Federico has given me a big dictionary where I can look up new words. I remembered ‘quitamotas’. Carmen shouted that at me when I told her I wanted to go on tour with Federico and La Barraca. Federico promised me that he’s going to teach me how to write stories. I want to learn. I love words. I love them and I need them. In exchange, I just have to act for him in his new play, *The Beautiful Beast*, which is all about me giving life back to the bull while Ignacio dies, all over again.

‘He’s a quitamotas,’ Carmen said. ‘You don’t believe him for a second, do you? Acting? You? Don’t make me laugh. You’re my model and I taught you for years before you could be any good even at that. I was patient with you, so patient. I gave you life.’

‘Quitamotas’ means someone who tells other people fake words and praises them so they can get what they want. A flatterer. But I don’t think Federico is tricking me. I want to write and he’s going to teach me.

### **Rahez**

This was the last word Carmen told me when she got so, so angry at me. It’s because now she knows about the play Federico just launched in Madrid. It’s called *Yerma*, and it’s about a woman who can’t have any children. I know this because Federico let me read some of it. Carmen screamed: ‘how does he dare’. She thought he wrote of a childless, perverse woman to mock her and that I helped him. So she didn’t want to see me, or listen to me. She locked me up in the library at home and swore to Dios and La Virgen María she wouldn’t allow me to come out until I returned to my senses.

‘Young flesh is what you are, but you’re rotting inside, you fucking monster,’ she howled, banging the door. ‘Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you...’

‘I’m not an animal, stop treating me like one,’ I screamed back.

‘You were a fucking feral animal when I found you.’

And she called what I do to her ‘rahez’ which is the most evil thing one can do to another person.

In the middle of the night, the door opened. It was Pedro. He didn't say anything, but he guided me through the house in darkness. He gave me a packed bag and his own coat before he put me in the street.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I thought you would help her get better...'

I didn't answer. I knew he was giving me away to Federico, so he wouldn't have to see me anymore.

'Please, don't come back,' he said.

He was freeing me from Carmen.

### **Sol**

This is my favourite word, ever.

'Sol' is in the sky, always present, always warm. When I lived at Carmen's house, it used to project changing pictures onto the shelves and onto the white sheets of my bed. It tickled my eyelids in the mornings until I woke. The morning sol appeared first in the library. It licked the oranges on the balcony and then spread through the living room, and the kitchen, and Carmen's bedroom, and Pedro's bedroom. The sol always disappeared in Carmen's studio, dying red beyond the tile roofs I could see from the window.

We're heading to Granada. My skin doesn't like the sol. It gets red and itchy. La Barraca people laugh at me and make me wear my new blue overalls and a hat even if it's so hot that I feel sweat running down my back, my upper lip and behind my ears.

### **Támara**

We arrived at Colmenar today and we are in a 'támara', which is an orchard of palm trees. I never imagined that palm trees could be this tall and this greenish golden colour. They are like very thin people with long manes of messy hair. La Barraca wagons stopped under their shadow a few hours ago and we all rested and drank sangría and sang because we're very close to the sea – I can smell the salt.

I was sitting under a palm tree, writing, when someone came. An old man with a big nose and eyes that pierced me like bullets.

‘This is my friend, Pablo Picasso,’ Federico said. ‘Pablo, this is Ciarán. He wants to be a writer.’

‘I heard about your miracles in Paris... came all the way from there to meet you. And you want to be a writer?’ He laughed. ‘You know about bulls, everyone tells me,’ Pablo said.

‘I’ve met El Toro, yes.’

‘I’ve met El Toro too,’ he answered.

Federico went back to the actors, but Pablo sat in front of me and took a pad from his pocket. He started sketching with a red pencil in one hand, holding a cigar in the other.

After a while, I approached him to look. There were different sketches of a boy sitting under the palm tree, but his body was all wrong, as if the scene was reflected by a broken mirror. And a dark, horned ghost, lurked from the night sky.

‘Why is the picture broken?’ I asked.

Pablo – the painter – didn’t answer, but gave me one page to keep.

## **Uñidura**

Federico is teaching me how to write beautiful words. Today he taught me ‘uñidura’, which means the perfect and harmonious union between two different things.

‘Music and words, for example, are two essences that come together in poetry, like lovers,’ he said.

I thought about that for a long, long time. There are these words I write in Spanish, that sometimes come slowly. And then, there are the other ones, that come in a different language: *A O come here bring your golden cattle bring the sun the moon and all the beautiful things you have created ...*

I whispered these words once to Federico and his eyes got brighter.

‘You’re speaking English!’ And then he said, in that other language, *‘I speak English, too. Do you understand me?’*

‘Yes... *I think so...*’ My legs started trembling. ‘Why English? They told me I come from Irlanda...’

‘*They speak English in Ireland, too. And in America. That’s where I learned.*’

‘*Why do I have two languages inside my head?*’

‘*It’s not a bad thing.* Why don’t you write something in English, too? Do you remember enough?’

Uñidura.

Each evening, on the stage, Federico directs us as if we were his orchestra. We have already passed by Antequera, Mollina and La Puebla. At night, he reads his poems aloud and the images dance in my soul like flames in the fireplace. Sometimes, Isabel liquorice-eyes comes to me when everything is quiet. We have to keep things secret because she’s Federico’s little sister.

‘I’m already a woman,’ she told me the first night. It’s true. Her belly is full of warm silk.

‘Holy shit...’ she said the first time we braided our naked bodies. ‘You’re a true inexplicable being. A saint. A mystery.’

Uñidura.

I’m thinking about Carmen. I haven’t seen her in such a long time. Long, long time ago, we were like one being. I remember the silence, and how she fed me the words. She was my voice when I couldn’t speak, she was my body when I was just pieces. I miss her dark eyes, I miss her rough voice and the bony tact of her body.

Uñidura.

I’ve started writing this story – about El Toro y La Niña.

## **Vahaje**

We just left Sevilla. I like to get up in the afternoons – like now. The ground is melting but we’re close to the sea. When ‘Vahaje’ blows (the sweetest wind of all) I can

actually move my fingers – they are not swollen in heat – and write. Sitting by my side, Federico writes too. He also likes silence to create. We're converting what we can only see inside our minds into something tangible.

**Whiski** (I couldn't find any other word starting with 'w'...)

We are heading to Cádiz. Yesterday we acted in a village close to Rota and after the show, when everyone was lighting candles and the alcohol melted in the air, Federico came to me.

'Someone wants to see you,' he said. 'But you don't have to go.'

'Who?'

He pointed out to the beach. I saw a man drinking from a bottle and gazing out to sea. He didn't seem to notice that the salty waves were licking his shoes. I recognised his sharp profile. I approached him.

'So here you are.' Pedro drank more from his bottle of 'whiski', this liquor that smells strong as petrol.

'You never spoke to me before. Never looked at me.'

'I hated you. You destroyed everything. And they called you saint.' He laughed.

I looked at the sea. The image of a skull smiling came to my mind. A pearly laugh.

'She's dying without you. She needs you. You have to come back.'

He threw the bottle to the waters and grabbed my shoulders.

'Get off,' I told him. 'If she needs me...' I didn't dare to say her name. 'She should come for me.'

'She doesn't know where you are. I'd be mad if I told her you're with Federico. You know how things are. She doesn't want to get away from the sculpture, which is more of you, anyways.'

'You helped me escape.'

'I thought I could get rid of you but I've realised that's not how it works.' Pedro tried to grab my arm but I moved back. 'She needs you.'

‘I’m not coming back, I like it here.’

‘You owe her, at least until she finishes the statue.’

‘I don’t know.’

I started walking away.

‘I saw your painting in Madrid...’ Pedro screamed, over the sea sound.  
‘Picasso, no less. *The Saint and The Bull*. It’s great. But her statue will be better.’

### **Xenoglosia**

‘Xenoglosia’ is the blessing of being able to speak different languages. There are two languages living in my head and now I can’t decide which one to use to write my story – *The three baptisms of La Niña de Irlanda* was Federico’s suggested title when he read the first draft. He says once it’s done he’ll give it to his friend José Bergamín and he’ll publish it. All the different words and meanings are giving me a hideous headache. I’m lying on the floor of the van and the other actors talk in whispers and Isabel is caressing my hair.

Writing the story is like tracing a path back home.

### **Yubarta**

We were driving by the sea this morning when Eduardo stopped the lorry.

‘Yubarta, yubarta...’ I heard them screaming.

I went out. The sun was rising. A splash in the distant sea. Whirlwind that broke the reflection of the sun in thousands of golden drops.

‘What’s that?’

They told me they were whales, coming from colder waters. These kind of whales – ‘yubartas’ – need the Mediterranean. Their bodies were enormous but graceful and they moved as if the sea was the air that carried them away. They celebrated their uñidura with the vast, threatening sea. They were not scared.

I remember the sea, and the boat. I should write about them in my story.

**Zubia**

I was standing on the 'zubia', the wet field, when the sea approached me. White foam playing around my ankles, warm and delicious.

I am a yubarta.

I'm not scared of the immensity of the ocean.

I came here to enjoy its strength and the power of its embrace.

To kiss young Spanish girls from unknown villages and sleep with them in the barn.

To be alone with Federico. He undressed me and he smiled, because by contemplating me he understood.

'Another miracle,' he said.

To hear the astonishment in the peasants' faces.

To see the claps of our sad crowds.

To write what I couldn't remember.

I've done all that already, and now

I'll return to Carmen

and the statue will be finished.

## THE MIRACLE OF MONTE TORO

1935

Madrid, 15th of April, 1935

Querida Carmen:

It was good to receive your letter. It's almost a month since you left. Glad to know you're enjoying Menorca.

You asked about La Institución – do you have time to think about it? I can't believe you actually miss it! Your students don't miss you. The girls are all delighted with Don Manuel – who is covering your class – as they are allowed to play with clay and pencil colours.

Yebra asked for you and wishes you a good recovery. He said to me that coming back to your family was the best thing to do, and I agree, if only I could meet your family too, cariño, but I didn't tell anything to Yebra, so don't worry.

My experiment is going well. Gonzalo and I are trying to get an article published. Yebra – bless him – still thinks it's a bit too radical to be in La Institución's magazine. Things are not going that well here after the Asturias' disaster and everyone 'fearing' the Communist and the Jews, so Yebra assured me people don't need to know that the world is ending in two centuries because our climate is going to change, on top of all. But I told him, if nobody acknowledges this, how are we going to work towards a solution?

Éboli misses you, she scratches the studio door and when I open it, she wanders around, looking for you. I miss the sound of your chisel, but not your food, sorry.

Un beso,

Pedro

Madrid, 29th of April, 1935

Querida Carmen:

How are things going at your parents'? Do they let you work? You never mentioned how they make a living, by the way. What about your siblings? I think I recall you talking about an older sister. It's strange. We've never discussed your family situation. You never mentioned it when we meet and then, after we married, I didn't asked you because I understood those memories triggered sour feelings. I wanted to respect you, so I didn't force you to go back to your past. But now I'm so afraid you just saw it as indifference.

Please send my regards to your mother and father. I hope your statue is coming along well. I received a letter from the Irish College at Salamanca, they want it as soon as possible. You should have seen the envelope. It had golden borders and a purple seal like in the middle ages. I kept it so we can laugh at it together.

Take some rest from carving.

Un beso,

Pedro

Madrid, 21st of May, 1935

Querida Carmen:

Why are you not writing anymore? Everyday I look into our pigeonhole but it's always empty. La señora de Rabadán, your favourite neighbour, came by the house the other day and asked if you were at the hospital again. Such an annoying woman! I bet she was thinking you were dying. So I told her you were visiting your family in the island. What island, she asked, and I told her, Menorca, and she seemed very surprised. I bet you're going to be very angry at me for telling la Señora de Rabadán something about you.

Is the carving going well? Don't forget to eat.

Un beso,

Pedro

Madrid, 19th of June, 1935

Querida Carmen:

Enough, don't you think so? This is the third letter I've written to you. Why are you not responding? Have I done something to upset you? Are you too busy working? So am I, but is it that hard to scribble a few words on a piece of paper and send it to me? I'm sure your parents can do it if you don't have the time.

I'm done. Is this your way of showing you don't care? What else do I have to do? Is this because I let the girl run away? What's with the girl? Yes, she's a girl, no matter how many times you insist on the opposite, and she's not our daughter, our son, or nephew, she's not even yours. She always gave me the creeps. She hasn't brought anything but trouble, can't you see it? A saint, ha. Your friend Federico told everyone about the 'Saint Ciarán's miracles'. Federico is such a fool, but that's hardly any news, is it? He just wanted to make you angry by taking the girl, because he knows your statues are a thousand times better than his stupid plays.

I didn't want to hurt you or to spoil your art in any form. I respect that.

I want you back, cariño.

Didn't I bring you the girl back?

If it's that fucking girl I'm going to... fuck Carmen, please, just write.

Pedro

Madrid, 3rd of July, 1935

Querida Carmen:

I talked to Yebra yesterday. I told him the truth: that you have left me.

He's given me a month of leave so I can go to Menorca to see if you're still alive. Thinking that you're there but you simply don't care is too cruel.

Pedro

Ciutadella, 13th of July, 1935

Querida Carmen:

I'm in Menorca now, and writing this letter that I will take to the post office first thing in the morning. I just arrived at this tasca and I'm so damn exhausted. The trip by boat was a pain. First I had to go to Barcelona by train and the heat was worse than hell. Then, the boat from Barcelona's port caught the storm – a storm, in the Mediterranean! When we arrived at Ciutadella, I swear I kneeled down to kiss the ground. I hate the water so much. What a horrible world this is going to be when oceans cover everything.

I have been eating fried calamari – after hours with an empty stomach – and now I'm dry and full of food in bed. We may meet tomorrow – so this letter is quite useless. You never told me where your parents lived, though. You just said 'the countryside' but that can be anything between Ciutadella and Mahón in the other side of the island.

Un beso,

Pedro

Ciutadella, 14th of July, 1935

Querida Carmen:

I can't believe this. I don't give a fuck if you don't read these letters but I need to write this. Fucking hell.

I went to the post office asking for de la Cierva family and nobody knew anything. I thought I hadn't made myself clear, because the islanders speak this language of theirs, or because of my accent. Yes, I still didn't see the obvious. So I spoke calmly to the postal worker saying that surely there had to be a mistake because my wife is called Carmen de la Cierva and her family lives on the island, which is not precisely big, so for fuck's sake, can someone just tell me where this family lives? Surely they know them. But the man, dressed in a cheap suit, kept shaking his head.

'Ho sento, senyor, there's no de la Cierva here.'

I kept insisting until everyone in the post office was looking at me and I thought they would take me out, like a crazy man. Me! Finally I had a brilliant idea and I pulled out your photo from my wallet, and showed it to them. She's my wife, I told them, she sent me one letter from this office. Don't you know her? You must have seen her around. Is she not coming here to collect my letters?

Yes, the letters. That's when someone came with a box full of my letters, the envelopes still glued.

Yes.

My mouth dried out. People's attitude changed, they weren't annoyed anymore but pitying. They understood.

One of the postal workers suggested I went back to town and show around your photo, if you're in the island someone must have seen you since you arrived four months earlier.

Another postal worker asked the terrible question; am I sure you are on the island?

But I know you're here. I still don't understand why you would lie to me about your family's surname. There are no de la Cierva here, but I know this is where you come from. You're an islander, you always were. When I first set foot in this strange place, of arid hills and carob trees, I knew this is where you came from. It couldn't be otherwise.

I'm going to find you.

Pedro

Ciudadella, 15<sup>th</sup> of July, 1935

Querida Carmen:

First day looking for you around Ciudadella. Now I understand when you talked about the terrible Menorca's wind, La Tramontana. It gets inside my head and makes me feel like a shivering tree. The city is small but bright, the light here is different – I remember you mentioned it too. I wandered around the houses, they have certain Italian air, large shuttered windows – but all shut down as if no one was really

living there. A couple of forgotten Renaissance palaces and a mastodon-cathedral trapped in the hidden streets. A few islanders walked here and there, always wearing abarcas. They say these shoes, made with car tyres, are the only ones sturdy enough to walk around the island, but I still have my leather boots on, thank you. I asked some old women sitting at the sun in front of the lonja, the old market, and then I asked at the tasca, and I asked at the little shops that sell pearls and ceramics for the tourists, but nobody knew you. These islanders seem to have no interest at all in tourists unless they can sell them a few trinkets.

I've been fearing you have changed too much. The photo I keep was taken eight years ago, you were just twenty-four, and it was before the operation... you still have the ferocious black eyes and the strong features shaped by the winds of this island, but you were alive back then. You screamed, and shouted at me, and we had sex and the way you kept me inside you, I knew you loved me. Now, you just exist for your statue.

You're turning into stone.

Pedro

Ciutadella, 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 1935

Querida Carmen:

Today was warm. The houses in Ciutadella, close to the shore, were so white it was painful to look at them. The sea resting in the port was silver. A head carved in the portico of the Torre Saura palace was blindfolded. S/he didn't seem bothered about uncertainty. Perhaps s/he was happy that way. I walked away from the city and the sun. I followed a path surrounded by holm oaks and grey foliage.

The path ended in a cliff. The sky was shallow.

I'm thinking about going back. There's the rest of the island to explore, but are you even here?

When I go back, I'll have to tell the truth to everyone. Hopefully, they won't ask too much. My mother will light candles for me at La Almudena and my sister will pray the rosary for me every single night. And Yebra will get me a date with one of the

young teachers from La Institución because I'm still attractive and have an excellent sense of humour.

The sea – down the cliff – had thousands of white, almost transparent spots dancing across the waves. Jellyfish.

I wanted so much to get rid of my clothes and swim. This heat. But even the sea was poisoned.

Pedro

Es Mercadal, 21<sup>st</sup> of July, 1935

Querida Carmen:

I keep writing you, I can't stop now. Last week I came back to the post office despite the shame I felt after they discovered that I am the man who has lost his wife. I thought you might have passed as a native islander here, but not the girl, surely not, with her fair skin and blond hair. So, I went in again, ignoring all the pitying glances. There was this pretty woman selling tobacco. She looked at me with such genuine sadness that I decided to take advantage of that. It was not easy to confess that my wife had disappeared in the company of a handsome young man, but I kept repeating he is our nephew – you told the story so many times that I ended up believing it.

The woman listened and finally admitted to have met such a boy who indeed came by the office to buy tobacco months ago. You cannot imagine, how sweet relief tasted in my mouth, you were in the island! Too bad the pretty woman didn't know where he'd gone.

So first I went by Ferreires and then here, to Es Mercadal. It actually took me quite a long time because I kept following the wrong road signs – apparently the Islanders change them to confuse tourists? Es Mercadal is so small: a handful of white houses and four lampposts on one paved street. But it's so easy to know everyone in this kind of place. So I asked an old woman. I said Bon Dia in Menorquín and then asked her about a young blond boy and a woman with dark curly hair.

It was difficult to understand the old woman, but she inserted as many Spanish words as she could in her Menorquin. I got that she was talking about another woman, called Marieta Taura, who had gone to the mainland years and years ago. She had left her family behind after her older sister died. Her parents were also dead now – and, at this point, the old woman crossed herself.

So Marieta Taura is your real name.

I said I was your husband and asked where you lived.

The Taura's house, *ací, acá*, she pointed out the huge green mountain lurking over Es Mercadal.

I couldn't even see your house, but I walked in that direction anyways. The hillsides were sparkling green and covered in yellow *vinagrellas*. There were curious cows grazing here and there, and their sweet eyes followed me.

The house was perched on a slope: a skeleton under the sun, the white paint almost gone. A small pond of murky green water and a few pine trees guarded its façade. The wooden door was rotten, and the front windows had a thick layer of dust covering them. I almost thought I wouldn't find you there – and that the old woman had been hallucinating, or talking about someone else. The sun was sinking beneath the purple horizon and shadows clumped everywhere. Cowbells echoed round the valley. Then I saw them, by the window, a fresh bunch of *vinagrellas* on a glass.

A cat came to say hello. Gey and soft, she rubbed against my legs. She was rounded and pregnant. She was happy I was there.

Pedro

Es Mercadal, 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1935

Querida Carmen:

I know you won't read this letter, but there are so many things I still have to tell you. However, every time I look at you, my words dry out. I can't tell you. I feel ashamed, because you're my wife. But I couldn't find you. I couldn't even touch you after the surgery – how can I even speak to you? I'd pray to Dios to show me the way but you don't want to hear about that either. 'Dios' makes you cringe because you said

you're broken and nothing (not even 'Dios') can heal you. Writing this is like praying anyways.

The sun in Menorca is pinkish. I'm sleeping a bit better now that you're around. I found you in the garden, working on the commission. At first I thought that the statue was someone else. It's incredible how much it has grown, and changed. The marble piece has legs, arms, a face... The bull is an impressive steed, the thick vein in his neck pulsing as if he was breathing. Your dress was covered in marble dust, your face and your eyelids white.

You didn't seem surprised when you saw me. You didn't smile but your eyes did. We were separated by worlds. Finally you said, 'You're here,' almost annoyed, as if you were tired of waiting for me.

The girl was inside the house, wearing a straw hat, slicing some cheese to make you dinner. I realised that she had been taking care of you all this time. I was so jealous thinking you had run away together but now I see you just took her because you need care when you're creating. She's a shadow to you, just as I am.

That same night you went to sleep in the room upstairs, in an iron framed bed. The windows were broken but it wasn't cold outside. The girl had a little bed on the bench next to the door. I decided to go for the worn-out armchair by the fireplace. It was dry and crispy like a nest. When I sat, it cringed and I saw spiders running out of it. I didn't dare to climb the stairs to claim my place by your side. It's not the time, yet.

Pedro

Es Mercadal, 6<sup>th</sup> of August, 1935

Querida Carmen:

You've been working on the statue for two weeks. I have cleaned the kitchen and used old newspapers to fix the windows.

We go to Es Mercadal and we buy creamy cheese, made from the cows that graze around the mountains. This herd, you told me, is the property of the Sisters of

Cow, an order of cloistered nuns that live up the mountain, guarding the sanctuary of La Virgen Del Toro. They make the cheese, and then the villagers sell it in the market.

The girl and I go to the sea. We catch crabs and shrimps. The fishermen in their small boats, lluts they call them, laugh at us. Vostè està fent malament, they say. Sometimes they sell us grouper.

The girl folds her trousers up to the knee and runs among the waves. When the jellyfish get trapped in the sand, she takes them back to the sea with her bare hands, even if they sting.

We've been talking. I didn't know her Spanish was so good. She's even writing a story. Sitting on the warm rocks, she works for hours. The story is about these two characters called El Toro and La Niña. She carries this huge Spanish dictionary around, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* – Federico's gift.

The girl has also showed me the 'bull face' behind the house. It's hidden among holm oaks and sables. Two large planks of stone, one on top of each other, forming a T. Dios knows who put them there and how old they are. Perhaps this is one of the taulas I read about.

I've been thinking about your statue. I know it's the most beautiful thing you've ever produced because I can feel it breathing. But I'm not sure people would come to worship it as you plan. It's too raw, too real for them. When they ask for idols and saints, they just want marionettes, simple ritualistic representations of something they know – perhaps subconsciously – is not real. People don't dare to worship Dios in solitude because they are scared to be alone with themselves. They are scared to gaze at the darkness. Your statue will make them uncomfortable because it must be appreciated in silence and solitude. Not during Missa or an Easter procession.

I wish I could tell you... but how can you say to a mother that her own child is cursed?

Pedro

Es Mercadal, 22<sup>nd</sup> of August, 1935

Querida Carmen:

You finished the statue yesterday. Or at least I thought so when you woke up in the morning but didn't go to the garden. You sat in the kitchen, looking at the vinagrellas on the windowsill, now withered. You drank water and looked at the clear sky. The seagulls cried outside.

The girl was out in Es Mercadal. The pregnant cat hadn't been around for days. The house is always so empty. I couldn't imagine a family living inside.

'Were you born here?' I asked you.

It took you a while to answer.

'Yes.'

'Where are your parents...?'

'They're gone. They took everything away, those bastards from the village.'

You started chewing a bit of hair. You didn't seem to care at all.

'It's beautiful here,' I said.

'The island is carnivorous.'

'What?'

'La tramontana... She will eat you.'

I took your hand between mine. Your skin was parched and rough, full of tiny brown spots. Your fingers were knotty. It didn't seem your hand anymore, but a claw. You're turning into something else. That's what scared me, ever since the surgery.

'The statue is done, we can go,' I told you.

'It's not done.'

Your eyes were red with tears.

'Why not?' I asked.

'It needs something else, the skin, the flesh, the way we're built, Pedro, I need to know.'

'What?'

'I have to be a mother.'

I was shocked.

'That's not—'

‘I need to. A baby, the secret of life, all happens inside.’ You started rubbing your belly. ‘Don’t tell me it’s impossible. There is a way.’

You leaned over me.

‘There’s a place, up there, Monte Toro...’ you said, pointing through the window towards the black greenish shape, the mountain that didn’t allow us to look at the sea behind. It created the illusion that we were not on an island. ‘The old shrine of La Virgen del Toro... El Toro hides up there, you know? El Toro grants any wish. We’ll go up there and ask El Toro to make me a mother.’

I thought you had lost it. You trembled so much. I knew your words were offending Dios but I said nothing because I didn’t want you to crumble and fade away.

‘Tonight there’s full moon, El Toro will be there. I’ll explain to him. We’ll all talk, and he’ll understand. And I’ll be a mother. Don’t you want me with a baby? Don’t you?’

For the first time I understood you were opening your soul to me, without reserve. All these years you have made it clear we were separate human beings: you were an island, you could exist perfectly well on your own. Now, for the very first time, you needed me to complete you.

And I thought we would never feel close again.

Pedro

Es Mercadal, 13<sup>th</sup> of September, 1935

This wait is killing us. You don’t speak to me at all. You follow Ciarán everywhere, looking for a fever, dizziness, a blush, a tremor. I can’t stand this anymore and what I did, up on the mountain, it’s devouring me from the inside. I need to write it down. I need confession.

Yesterday I climbed Monte Toro again. Under the burning sun, each step seemed to bring me closer to hell. I passed by the convent of the Sisters of Cow and went towards the new sanctuary. I crawled into the small prayer room that smells of sea and plaster. There is only a black wooden crucifix hanging on the wall. It must be held

with fishing line because it seems to levitate on a corner. Jesucristo looking down on me, so pitifully. A young priest entered the room and his brown eyes screamed faith and forgiveness. He introduced himself as Padre Juan Huguet Cardona, and asked me about the Taura's house and about you and about the boy. He wondered why we haven't shown up at mass and then I felt the bitterness of tears in the back of my throat. I told him I was lost. He offered me confession. I wish I could say I refused, but I went inside the confessional. And I told him that you are cheating on me with a young man who you say is your nephew but he really isn't. I told him that you found him in Madrid's streets and he was a beggar. I told him I'm ashamed because everyone knows about him and they call me a cornudo, a horned man, one who can't keep his wife faithful. And I told him that I cannot bear it anymore now that you're carrying his child.

Yes, I told him.

Padre Juan listened to me, and he felt for me and guided me with wise words. It hurt even more, that, you know. Like salt burning on my lies.

This is what happened on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August, night-time:

As soon as the glowing moon climbed over the Monte Toro, you called for us. We started walking as La Tramontana carried the heat away and brought rosemary and chamomile to the air. Monte Toro was a menacing mass of blue grass and black rocks on the horizon. You led the way, breaking branches, stepping on the heat-dried bushes. I followed you, and the girl stayed behind.

'Hurry, hurry...' you said.

The girl was scared. I took her hand. It was the first time I touched her. From the very beginning it was clear she was only another piece of you. Something I could break. Or misunderstand.

We climbed the rocks and tasted the dust before arriving at the top. There was no wilderness there but a blue building and the new sanctuary. We tiptoed pass the convent and this time La Tramontana brought the Sisters of Cow's chants, and it was like hearing Dios, and my soul shivered.

You guided us towards the back of the sanctuary, where a small cave had been carved in the sterile rocks. The old shrine. Next to it there were two large planks of stone, one on top of the other, forming a T. Another bull's face. The entrance to this primitive shrine was hidden between two wild olive trees. In the distance, the sea was a silver line parting the blackness.

Inside, you lighted the candles you'd brought along. The wax made me feel as if I was chewing myrrh. All I could see was a minuscule altar, old as the island itself. Three figures were carved into the stone. El Toro, La Virgen and Jesús. El Toro was lying, huge horns down, like a faithful dog resting at his mistress' feet. The most miraculous mother of them all held a baby with the face of an old man. And she had a couple of horns, crescent moons, on her head.

You sat on the floor and we followed. It was warm. The moon spied on us from the entrance.

You leaned on the girl and embraced her. Under the candlelight, your hands were timid dragonflies.

Suddenly the girl was naked.

I mumbled a pray to the horned Virgen del Toro.

Your bony body came out from your dress and poured over the girl. You made her lie between your thighs, head on your scarred belly.

And the second miracle happened. The girl turned into a young woman, with a fresh, tight body ready to be opened. Sea-eyes reflecting the moon. You held her shoulders and grabbed her small breasts like apples. You separated her legs, slowly, offering her ripped sex to me.

I understood.

Pedro

Es Mercadal, 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 1936

Querida Carmen:

You were right. They came. The most beautiful days. We walk through the island, greeting the taulas, the ancient bull faces. We walk through the waves. Dresses are long and dance around the legs, as if La Tramontana's wind had acquired colour and texture. Blond, black curls. We walk on the spongy sand. Our footprints remain a second there, then they are gone forever. The water is kind. There are not jellyfish but purple seaweed. We start a collection of shells. Water will be a blessing for this world. We walk, the water up to our waists, liquid sun, blessing the rounded belly. We dance, and sing, and kiss each other. Monte Toro is behind, looking on us.

Pedro

## THE DEATH OF THE TREES

1936

### The Siege of Madrid – November 8th

La Institución's walls trembled and the workshop's ceiling spat out some plaster. Ciarán stopped sewing the blankets and looked up.

‘Shhhh, shhhh.’ Carmen calmed the baby's wails.

The students kept sketching in their notepads. They were drawing a still life: three brown apple cores and a broken cup that Carmen had fixed on her desk.

Mortar exploded.

Echoes of the shooting outside.

‘Ciarán,’ one of the second-year girls sitting in the first row called him. ‘Are they coming?’

‘No. They got to Casa de Campo Park, but the army is fighting them there,’ he said. ‘I heard it on the radio, this morning.’

‘Are the fascists coming to kill us, Doña Carmen?’ one boy asked.

‘Ramiro, stop asking stupid questions and keep on drawing,’ she answered. The baby was sucking on one of her fingers. ‘I'm going to go around in a few minutes. The sketches have to be done, no excuses. Am I clear?’

A rattle came from the corridor.

The door opened.

‘The class is over,’ Yebra shouted as he came in, followed by a horde of men, women and children. Ciarán recognised some of them – Emilio, the Maths teacher, Rosaura, the owner of the ultramarine shop down the road, Vicentillo, the postman's son... ‘Come on, you all. Time to join the Popular Front against the fascists. Let's go, let's go now, before the bastards burn down Madrid...’

The students stared at the principal with the eyes of starving rodents. A girl on the last row stood up and started packing her bag.

‘Stay,’ Ciarán mouthed. ‘Yebra, please. Do you want to take the children to the barricades or what? I know the fascists are getting closer and we're all damn scared but at least an art lesson is a distract—’

‘La Institución closed months ago, and Madrid needs soldiers,’ Yebra interrupted him.

‘Yes, soldiers, but the children need something to do. I need something to do too. It’s just a bit of paper, pencils...’

‘We’re doing no harm here. These children... their parents are dead or fighting or... They’ve nowhere to go. They couldn’t escape from Madrid in time. We’re protecting them, giving them shelter...’ Carmen added.

‘Just let us be, Yebra, please.’ Ciarán hadn’t seen the principal in weeks. He looked very different, with a long beard and messy hair. His suit was muddy. Ciarán knew he and his crowd hadn’t come into the classroom looking for a place to hide from the bombs. They *owned* the room. It was the rifles that gave them authority, and the shotguns (the kind people used to kill rabbits in Casa de Campo Park) and the knives, and the bricks, and the sticks

‘Everyone out to fight for Madrid, now, and that’s an order.’ The rifle that Yebra carried was rusty.

‘We’re not going anywhere,’ Ciarán said. ‘Not today, not ever.’

Yebra lifted the rifle, aiming at the blackboard.

A shot.

A student screamed and some started to cry. Slate pieces fell on the floor. The baby howled.

Vicentillo, one of the soldier-boys accompanying Yebra, smirked. He must have thought a lot of himself for carrying a knife.

‘Asshole,’ Ciarán whispered. ‘Yebra, please...’ He begged.

‘We’ve already warned you. Many times. Many, many times.’

‘Yebra...’

‘Why do you keep coming here? There’s a war outside. There is no time for education. And you?’ Yebra shouted at Carmen over the baby’s cries. ‘You think your stupid art will make things better?’

‘Art is the only thing that is not senseless right now,’ Carmen replied.

‘What about Spain?’

‘You’re not going to leave anything behind. There’ll be no Spain.’

‘Oh, shut up and come here Carmen... and you too, finflón, come here, right now.’ Yebra grabbed Ciarán’s arm.

‘Get off me,’ he shouted. ‘Get off me now.’

‘Don’t hurt him...’ Carmen yelled, but two rifle-men seized her.

Ciarán kicked at Yebra’s legs.

‘Let me go...’

‘Where is Pedro?’ The principal slapped Ciarán.

‘He’s out... he’s...’

‘I bet he’s sick of you and Carmen already. Because you don’t show him any respect. Fucking his wife and all. Everyone knows the baby is yours. Weirdo.’ Yebra spat on Ciarán’s face.

Ciarán jabbed his elbow into Yebra’s cheekbone, stumbling back when one of the men slammed the stock of his rifle into his face.

‘Stop, stop,’ Carmen screamed in the background.

Through the curtain of pain and dripping blood, Ciarán struggled to stay on his feet. He wanted to scream, to get a stick, a chair, anything.

‘You can take the boys if you have to,’ Carmen told Yebra, ‘but leave the girls with us’

‘Leave you the girls?’ the principal sneered. ‘Everyone is fighting for Madrid today. Didn’t you hear? The fascists are at the fucking doors. We need to build more barricades.’

‘Girls fight for Spain too, you dumbass,’ Rosi, the ultramarines’ granddaughter, said. Her rags were stained in blood but she wore shining pearl earrings. She shoved Ciarán hard and he tripped over a chair and fell to the floor.

‘Fucking foreigner.’ She spat on him too.

The soldier-boys roared with laughter.

Carmen ran to Ciarán and crouched at his side.

‘You alright? You alright...?’

‘Vicente, arm these soldiers,’ Yebra ordered. The soldier-boy brought a flour sack, opened it, and started to share bricks with everyone.

Pieces of wooden beams.

A blunderbuss that had probably been used in the last century's Cuban war.

A fire poker.

There wasn't enough for everyone.

'What are you doing?' Ciarán's face had gone numb. 'Carmen, we can't let him. The International Brigades are arriving today. Those are your soldiers, Yebra.'

'Yeah, the government said so, but the government left Madrid yesterday, didn't you hear? Gone to Valencia. We're just the rabble that's left behind to defend everything.'

'And bringing children to the barricades is the answer? Why don't you just kill them instead, right here? It's all going to be the same. We're not leaving. We're not going anywhere,' Ciarán said.

'Yes, that's right. We're not going,' Carmen added. 'You can burn this school to pieces and we'll still be here, mouldering in the ashes.'

'Me cago en Dios... shut up, Carmen.' Yebra hit the ground with his rifle. 'Boys, get them all out.'

The rifle-men dragged them to the garden. It was crispy cold. Minuscule snowflakes landed hard on the frosted grass.

'You're too good to die for Spain, you dirty foreigner?' A shotgun-woman pulled Ciarán's hair. He saw how the crowd dragged Carmen behind him.

'Leave me alone... ' Ciarán screamed at the shotgun-woman. The boom and racket of shooting from Casa de Campo Park was making him crazy.

'Traitors,' an old worker carrying an iron bar said.

The air smelled of gunpowder. Dark clouds of smoke swirled in the sky. Branches of acacia trees thrashed in the wind above their heads.

The students circled round Carmen. They feared her because she was a strict teacher, but they relied on her, too. Many of them had wet faces but they were no longer sobbing. The ones that were armed looked even more scared. They waited for Carmen's instructions.

'Stay close, here, come here...' She grabbed at them with her free hand. The other one was curled around the baby.

Her pose reminded Ciarán of *Sparrows*, a film Carmen had taken him to watch way before the war. She resembled La Virgen María, mothering outcast children.

Yebra climbed onto a bench, standing above his people, who formed a ring around him. Pedro used to bring the principal home for dinner, buying Cava, sparkling wine, for all such occasions. Like many of the staff in La Institución, Yebra had supported the Republic, which had been generous with funding. He had always been critical of the communists and the anarchists, but Pedro was exactly the same. Was Yebra an anarchist now, though? A communist, asking the city of Madrid to stand together against Fascism? Shotguns for books, bricks for Latin dictionaries, sticks for dusty translations. The principal had turned into a different person. A person who marched with the ones who carried guns and made violence.

‘I’ll say it once again. This. Is. Over,’ Yebra called from his high position. ‘The Institución is gone. We have to build barricades to protect Madrid.’

‘From whom?’ Ciarán asked.

‘From the fascists, the anarchists, the communists, the socialists and all the bloody enemies outside. Books are not going to get us out of this, look what happens, students hide in here like chickens instead of holding a rifle to fight our enemies. At least the communist boys from the university are brave. Shame on you, yes you, you bunch of useless academics. I think you’ve to fight now or you’re going to be dead before this is all over.’

‘Carrying arms is the best way to die soon,’ Ciarán said.

Carmen grabbed his shoulder.

‘Shut up, he’ll use the goddamn gun,’ she whispered.

But he couldn’t stop himself.

‘What are you going to do? Kill us all?’

Yebra pointed his rifle at Ciarán.

‘You ungrateful shit. Didn’t you join La Barraca? With Federico García Lorca?’

‘What?’

‘Yes, didn’t he called you Saint Ciarán?’

‘Yeah, that’s it,’ a woman said.

‘Saint Ciarán.’

‘Fucking nonsense.’

‘Where’s Federico now?’ Yebra asked him.

‘He’s dead.’ Ciarán felt his eyelids burning.

‘He was murdered by the fucking fascists, shot like a dog. That’s why we’ve to fight.’

‘This foreigner is not one of us.’

‘He’s a German spy,’ a shotgun-woman claimed.

‘What are you going to do, Yebra?’ Ciarán swallowed bile. ‘You’re no better than Federico’s killers if you think you can decide how we live our lives. You can take us, you can kill us, you can burn the damn building but the trees will stay here an—’

Someone threw a brick at him.

Pain.

The world turned backwards spinning round him. A red hue flooded the scene.

Ciarán realised that he was sprawled on the ground. He couldn’t open his right eye. His skull was too small to contain his throbbing brain. Where had the brick come from? One of the children? Sounds rippled to his ears from under the water. He struggled, but got up.

‘We need wood for the barricades,’ Yebra shouted.

The armed men went inside the gardener’s hut and brought out the axes and all the sharp objects they could find. Mauro, the gardener, was with them. The brick-boys had already started kicking down the slender almond trees.

The women used the back of their shotguns to break the thin branches from the lilac trees.

‘You hungry? You hungry, children?’ Yebra’s distorted voice roared.

Tarmac smell.

On the top of Yebra’s head.

A glimpse of horns.

‘Help me bring wood to the barricades and I’ll give you so much chorizo, and jamón, and pan. Bring that wood and I swear you’ll eat until you’re sick,’ the principal laughed.

‘No, no, no...’ Ciarán begged, but the students were already running after Yebra’ words.

Carmen appeared by his side and pressed something wet against Ciarán’s face.

The children came towards the olive trees, mattocks in hand.

Yebra approached the oak holm trees with an ax.

Ciarán grabbed Carmen’s hand.

‘Stop it, stop—’ he cried.

The children, and the women, and the men circled the old apple tree that towered over the building.

The tree wobbled.

Branches scratched at the windows.

Branches broke off.

When the tree fell there was a strong noise, like a moan.

Screams cut into his gut, sharp as knives.

Around him there was no garden.

Stumps.

Some of the children held pieces of wood.

Others helped carry the bigger trunks away.

Yebra came to him and pulled his clothes.

‘The only reason I’m not killing you is because of that baby,’ Yebra said.

La Institución’s garden had been turned into a barren land.

Murdered.

## The Siege of Madrid – November 16th

It was always the same.

First

the noise, like the sky cracking and vomiting

rebel planes, de tres en tres

(the three widows)

and the flares

(the air smelled of tarmac)

BOOM.<sup>3</sup>

Everyone was in the streets that night, just like in Verbena time. There were no screams or laughter, though, only whispers and suspicious glances.

Ciarán rushed behind Carmen and Pedro. They were arguing.

‘Let’s go to El Prado Museum,’ Carmen said.

‘No, no, no. The underground is better.’

‘Look at this, haven’t you seen it?’ She held a creased flyer in front of him. ‘They’re bombing the north tonight. Casa de Campo Park. The University. We’ll be safe in El Prado. Ciarán? What do you think?’

‘El Prado,’ he agreed, carrying the only suitcase they had left. There was not much inside: one dirty shirt, dried cheese and half a scarf – the other half was around his head, protecting his healing wound, the one caused by the brick. At least people liked to share things with them when they saw the baby. ‘It’s very well protected, El Prado,’ he added.

‘Yeah, I remember.’ Pedro’s greasy hair had white spots stuck to it. Plaster from the underground, where they hid the day before. ‘Back in October. The government was very worried about preserving the art and setting up all those reinforcements. Where the fuck are they now, huh? Who’s going to preserve us?’

‘That’s what I mean,’ Carmen added. ‘We’ll be safe there... Stop, stop. The baby’s crying. She’s hungry, stop.’

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<sup>3</sup> Extract of a poem attributed to Ciarán de la Cierva and published in several Republican pamphlets during the Siege of Madrid in the Spanish Civil War.

‘There’s no time,’ Pedro looked at Ciarán.

He shook his head. There was no milk to feed the baby. He was not going to feed the baby again. The baby was Carmen’s. She’d have to take care of it.

‘Let’s go... they’ll be bombing anytime now, Carmen, please.’ Pedro’s voice was sharp.

Inside the museum, there were so many dust motes that it was difficult to breathe. People hid behind the paintings and next to the statues. A bunch of men crouched under *The Roman Charity*, a marble statue that showed a woman offering her full breasts to a starving old man. There were empty frames on the walls, and sacks filled up with sawdust on the floor. Children cried. The baby cried.

‘We should have gone to the underground...’ Pedro said. ‘This is going to turn into a sarcophagus...’

‘No, no. Look at the walls, the windows... look at those beams... nobody is tearing the Prado down,’ Carmen answered. ‘They don’t have the balls.’

‘*The Garden of Earthly Delights* is gone...’ Ciarán told her. ‘I went to look for it before.’

‘Fucking looters...’ Carmen sat on the floor and unbuttoned her dress, holding the baby’s face against her nipple. She sucked with pale lips. Only Ciarán knew there was nothing there, whilst his own breasts hurt. They were so swollen. It was impossible to get rid of the pain with the baby so close to him, all day.

‘We should have gone to the underground...’ Pedro repeated.

‘Wait. I need to pee. I’ll be quick,’ Ciarán said.

Carmen grabbed his arm.

‘Don’t go outside. The bombs will start any moment now. Promise.’

‘It’ll be alright,’ he said. Then he sprinted out of the room. Some people looked at him. Others slept. Prayed. A mother told a story to her five children. Or six. Maybe they were not even hers.

Ciarán found a dark corner. At first his heart pounded, thinking there was someone waiting for him there, but it was just another statue. A young woman, although he couldn’t be sure in the dark. He opened his shirt and took one of his

breasts out and started massaging it around the nipples to let the white substance go out faster. It was alien and disgusting, like his body didn't belong to him anymore. The baby. Her tiny skull covered by a soft layer of pinkish skin – and her pale lips. Nobody was feeding the baby. But the baby wasn't his. The baby was Carmen's. He didn't have anything to do with the baby. When she came out, covered in blood and a brown thick substance, Carmen had taken her between her white hands. White like milk. He hadn't touched the baby for weeks. He hadn't dared. The baby was Carmen's.

Someone was crying. Ciarán cleaned his wet fingers on his trousers and crawled back to the light. There was a young boy sitting by an empty pedestal, with a group of people around him, although he seemed to be completely unaware. He was focused on holding his bandaged belly with black hands.

Ciarán came to him.

'You okay?'

The boy looked up. His face was covered with dirt, or freckles, it was difficult to tell. His eyes were full of tears but he kept his moans quiet.

'A brave one.' An old woman patted the boy's head. 'He won't talk. He came with the International Brigades. Brave little boy.'

A wail.

The planes were approaching.

The old woman screamed.

'Please Dios save us.'

'Virgen María... please... keep us alive...'

The air in the room turned sour.

'*Oh, God...*' the boy cried. He wasn't speaking in Spanish yet Ciarán understood what he was saying.

'*Who are you?*' he said to the boy in English.

'*I'm Michael,*' the boy answered. Under the blackened eyelids, his blue eyes recovered a bit of brightness.

'*Are you from Ireland?*'

'*Yes, yes, Roscommon, I'm from Roscommon.*'

*'I know Roscommon! Why are you here?'*

*'I'm fighting against the fucking fascists. I'm...'* The Irish boy started crying aloud, holding his belly.

*'Does it hurt?'* Ciarán asked.

*'Yes...'*

He held the dying boy in his arms. His cheeks were burning. But the boy was from Ireland. He could tell him things. He could answer questions. Ciarán reopened his shirt and offered his right breast to the Irish boy, who started sucking. The moans stopped. The boy's teeth hurt his skin but the flow was pleasant. He held him tight. The boy's copper hair was oily and thick with dirt.

*'Hush, hush,'* Ciarán said, placing his hand on the Irish boy's forehead.

The old woman had her eyes focussed on them. She crossed herself.

*'Jesusito de mi alma,'* she said. *'He's the saint.'*

*'What?'* Someone else asked.

*'He's the saint.'*

*'Who? Him?'*

*'I saw him before. I won't ever forget it. He's healing the little soldier.'*

*'Abuela, what are you saying?'*

*'He's the saint,'* she repeated, holding her cross-necklace tightly. *'From the bullfighting. He was the one who resurrected the bull. The one who resurrected the bull at Manzanares. Don't you remember?'*

*'Saint Ciarán...'*

*'Are you Saint Ciarán?'* a young woman asked.

*'Saint Ciarán of the Blessed Bull?'*

*'How did you save that bull?'*

*'What happened to your head? Why is it bandaged?'*

*'Did the fascists attack you?'*

*'Yes, I am Ciarán...'* he said.

*'Is it true that you made a barren woman conceive?'*

*'He's feeding that boy, like La Virgen María...'*

*'He's like La Virgen...'*

The sound of fighter planes approaching.

Silence.

Everyone froze, like the statues.

The roar grew louder.

‘Ciarán, please, save us.’

‘Save us...’

‘Save us...’

‘Pray to La Virgen for us...’

He was surrounded by a wave of blackened hands and cold bodies, all piling on top of him. The planes were getting closer. The Irish boy bit his nipple.

The first bomb fell.

The whole building trembled, waves of anguish and screams flooding it.

‘Carmen,’ Ciarán shouted, shoving the Irish boy away. ‘Carmen.’

The glass in the windows exploded.

‘Saint Ciarán, save us...’

‘Save us...’

‘Carmen, Carmen...’ he yelled, crawling towards the other room.

A second bomb.

The doors cracked.

‘Carmen...’

He could see her coat. Everyone was covered in white, and there was plaster everywhere, like snow. But the bodies moved. The bomb hadn’t fallen there.

*‘AO come here, Ciarán said, bring your golden cattle, bring the sun, the moon, and all the beautiful things you have created...’*

The words spilled from his mouth. They tasted sour, coming from somewhere deep, as hidden as his milk ducts. All the eyes in the room were on him. He saw Carmen extending her hands in his direction and that gave him the strength to climb onto a bench and to stand there despite his trembling knees.

*‘AO, come here, look at me, I am nothing but a drop in a storm, please take me with your hands, cast your light in these dark corners from the Bán sea to the Loughmichnois.’*

Nobody understood a word he was saying, yet they looked at him as though they were seeing a ghost or a god. Some started mimicking his sounds between their screams.

The building vibrated like a ship in a storm.

A third bomb.

*‘AO, come here, teach me the things I ought to know, the secrets of the rain, the milk, the written words, the secret self...’*

A fire raged outside the building. Heat scorched his skin as the temperature rose. Flames licked into the room.

*‘AO, come here, I shall give you my blood and flesh, I shall be the seed that will feed the world, I shall be a beam of light in your sun.’*

The ceiling cracked.

An object fell through the smashed window into the room.

Smoke rose and soon everything was covered in powder-fog.

Ciarán spat on his hands and cleaned his eyes. The fallen object was right in front of him. It resembled a metallic fish. He approached it and took it between his hands. It was small. Like a baby. Cold. He didn’t tell anyone it was a bomb. People were already running towards the doors, trying to breathe clean air.

The planes were gone for the night.

El Prado stood still, quiet except for the crackling flames.

### **Colegio de los Irlandeses – November 29th**

Carmen, Pedro and Ciarán travelled from Madrid to Salamanca during the night. A man called Rodrigo had offered to drive them there. It was damp inside his car, and dark – dark as it must have been inside his mother’s womb, Ciarán thought. The escape was all thanks to Pedro. Someone from church got them to the fascist front. Once they were there, Pedro got in touch with Miguel de Unamuno, one of his former teachers from Salamanca, and dean of its university.

‘Not good times for Christian families,’ Rodrigo mumbled, before letting them into the car. He refused Pedro’s money and stated he didn’t want anything for the trip.

‘Are both your children?’ Rodrigo asked, after staying silent for more than four hours. He had been staring at Ciarán, sitting by his side. He was obviously curious to know where the blue eyes and blond hair came from.

‘Yes,’ Carmen said, ‘my...’

‘They are my aunt and uncle,’ Ciarán interrupted her. ‘The baby is theirs.’

‘How old is he?’

‘She,’ Ciarán corrected the driver. ‘Six months.’

‘Not good times for having babies,’ Rodrigo mumbled.

‘Babies are always a blessing.’ Carmen rocked her daughter. The child was her daughter, nobody doubted that. Any random stranger could see immediately that Ciarán didn’t belong to the family right away.

‘That’s what you need. A blessing. You all teachers from La Institución?’ Rodrigo asked.

Pedro nodded.

‘Heard of that place. It was good. What a shame.’

‘Yeah.’ Ciarán caressed the scab on his forehead. The wound was almost healed.

‘Some people have lost respect for everything. Churches, museums, schools... they just want blood,’ the driver continued. ‘What are you going to do in Salamanca?’

‘Just passing by.’ Pedro peered through the window. ‘We’re heading to the Netherlands. We have laissez-passers to leave Spain. I’m a scientist. Some colleagues live there, see.’

‘That’s good.’ For the first time, Rodrigo’s voice was not as rough. ‘That’s good. What about the package? It’s heavier than a corpse.’

‘That’s my sculpture. We’ve to deliver it to the Irish College at Salamanca,’ Carmen answered.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Ciarán said.

The car stopped in front of an old building, the Irish College. Light flashed in the darkness of the street. A torch. Someone knocked at the car’s window. Rodrigo opened his door.

‘We have to be quick. Come down.’ A man with glasses and a pointy white beard grabbed their only suitcase in his free hand. He dropped it on the pavement, fumbled in a pocket and gave an envelope to Rodrigo, wishing him a safe trip back to Madrid. The driver’s door slammed closed and the car was gone. The man with the pointy beard had to be Miguel de Unamuno, Pedro’s teacher from Salamanca. He had supported the fascists at the beginning of the war and, as university Dean, had many connections in the city.

Outside, the rain was corrosive like acid. Soon, Ciarán was drenched.

‘Miguel, so good to meet you again...’ Pedro shook hands with the old man before reaching for the suitcase. Miguel held onto it, and the two men fought for the suitcase handle for a few seconds. Miguel won.

‘Yes, Pedro, gracias a Dios you’re all here safe. No time to talk though. Come on, let’s go. Hurry. They’re very angry after the communists bombed the city.’

‘What?’

‘No time, come on. I’ll take you to the other car.’

‘No. No.’ Carmen refused to move. A small puddle of water was forming around her. ‘We’re not taking the *other* car. We’re going to the Irish College first. The statue. You’ve to take the statue. Ciarán, get the statue,’ she ordered.

He went to the bulk covered in dirty sheets and cardboard that Rodrigo had left on the ground.

‘Carmen... I apologise to you, Pedro told me you are a sculptor, but...’ Miguel said.

‘Pedro, help me here,’ Ciarán said, trying to grab the statue. ‘Help me.’

Carmen continued to argue with Miguel and Pedro.

‘I’m delivering the statue to the Irish brothers,’ she said, raising her voice over the rainfall. ‘That’s why we’re here, Pedro. That’s why we stopped at Salamanca. You said.’

‘Miguel has friends in Bilbao, Carmen. They’re taking us up to the coast, to catch the boat. To the Netherlands. We’ve already discussed this. Carmen, please.’

‘He’s right,’ Ciarán peered at the old man, who wore round glasses that framed his owl eyes.

‘We’re doing nothing to upset the fucking fascists. They won’t even know we’re here. Pedro.’

‘Carmen...’ He grabbed her hand but she shoved him away. The baby whimpered.

‘You’re risking your daughter’s life,’ Pedro said.

‘Yes, Carmen, let’s go.’ Ciarán stopped trying to grab hold of the statue and walked towards them. He knew Pedro was right. It was foolish, stupid, and unnecessary. They already had the boat tickets to go to the Netherlands, far away from the war, the horror, the bombs. Stopping at the Irish College on their way north was pushing their luck. Yet, that statue was everything to Carmen.

‘Do I have to remind you who paid for the boat tickets? And the safe-passage letters?’ she said. ‘The statue is what’s saving us. They’ve never been late, not with even one single payment, not even after the war. I owe them, Pedro. I have to deliver it to them.’

Carmen ran down the street, towards the Irish College. She climbed the stone stairs to the black wooden door and banged the knocker.

‘Fuck it...’ Pedro came back to take one end of the statue and Ciarán grabbed the other.

They took it to the door.

The rain poured down on them, heavier than ever.

Ciarán couldn’t see – the water irritated his eyes, blurred his vision. The baby had stopped crying, but she shouldn’t have been out in the cold. Her place was inside a car on the way to Bilbao. Dry.

The door had a small grilled window that served as peephole. Carmen tiptoed and pressed her face against it, whispering. She must have seen someone.

‘They want the statue inside,’ Carmen said.

‘The monks?’ Ciarán asked.

The door creaked opened. Two men hunched in dark habits waited on the other side. One of them carried a torch. Their skin was parched, like old paper, both of them withered and desiccated with age.

‘Good evening, brother,’ Miguel greeted the monk that carried the lamp. ‘My good friend de la Cierva...’

‘Yes, yes. Please, bring it inside.’

‘You’re going to need help, the statue is heavy,’ Carmen told them.

‘This is not a good idea,’ Pedro said. ‘Carmen, we need to go. Leave it here. They can deal with it.’

‘Just help them bring it inside,’ she said.

Ciarán held one end, while Pedro manoeuvred the other down the entrance. They stumbled pass the cloister, following Carmen, Miguel and the monks. The courtyard had a well in the centre. Water leaked, pouring out of the well shaft and flooding the cobbled square. It went into Ciarán’s shoes, soaking his feet. His fingers slipped on the damp wrappings of the statue.

‘Can we help you?’

Ciarán let a sigh of relief when two men appeared. Until he lifted his head, saw, and realised.

The green uniform.

The arrows and the yoke.

The statue wobbled – Pedro had also noticed.

‘Good evening, General Márquez,’ he heard Miguel say.

‘Good evening, Don Miguel. This bloody rain...’ one of the soldiers helped them carry the statue. ‘Come inside.’

Ciarán met Carmen’s eyes. This is it, he thought, and he almost heard her saying yes, this is it.

They all followed General Márquez into the chapel.

A few candles burned, the smell of rain mixed with the stink of wood rotting in the damp. At the end of the room, the altarpiece shone, coated in gold leaf and painted with images of angry saints. Jesucristo stood, crucified on top, his sad face compassionate as though sorry for them. He was used to the pain, the blood, the constant suffering. Below him, was an empty space where the image of the patron saint should have been. There were bullet holes all over the altarpiece.

They set the statue on the ground. There was a deep, reverberating sound when the marble collided with the stoned floor. Like the start of a ritual.

Soldiers sat on the benches and stood on the balcony on the second floor, cleaning their rifles, eating from cans, chatting in small groups. Rodrigo had already told them that the glorious rebels from the Nationalist Army were protecting the churches, convents and monasteries. Terrible news came from Barcelona and the east, where the republicans were setting the sacred places on fire, raping the nuns and killing the priests. Some of the soldiers gazed at them. Ciarán lowered his head.

‘So, what is this, Don Miguel?’ General Márquez cleaned the rain from his face with a handkerchief. It was embellished with blue embroidery and Ciarán saw the letters ‘J’ and ‘M’.

‘It’s the work of my good friend, de la Cierva. A very talented sculptor, the Irish brothers commissioned her to make this piece years ago...’ Miguel kept a confident tone, but Ciarán could see how he held his hands behind his back to hide their trembling.

The statue was still wrapped. Rodrigo was right. It looked more like a wrecked body swaddled in a shroud. But Ciarán knew what was inside. Carmen’s finest creation. A miracle. A true one, like him bringing El Toro back to life, giving Carmen her baby, or preventing the bomb from exploding in El Prado. They were going to be saved.

‘Can I see?’ General Márquez asked.

Many of the soldiers had come forward and were now peeking at the bulk.

‘Yes,’ Ciarán answered.

Márquez unwrapped the statue with great care. The monks came closer to examine. Ciarán tiptoed.

The block of marble was gone. In its place, a young man with soft pearly skin was revealed. His limbs were lustrous and slender, displaying the candour of adolescence. His head was held high, gazing ahead, with features that were too extravagant to be perfect. That's why he looked so real. So alive. His weightless body was in harmony with the bull he rode. A great animal of thick neck and terrible legs, tail up and alert. Yet, the boy held one of his horns – fearless – and smiled, because he was not taming El Toro but guiding him along. There was so much detail – from the veins on El Toro's neck to the little bones on the saint's feet; from his teeth to El Toro's balls.

The soldiers and the monks spent a long time staring at the statue. This was the first time the piece had been exhibited. Ciarán could see himself in it – the broad hands, the crooked nose – yet the real Saint Ciarán, the one created from the Carrara marble, had that divine halo already.

‘What is this?’ General Márquez asked.

‘It's Saint Ciarán, it's a commission paid by the Irish College that I...’ Carmen said.

‘He's naked.’

‘Yes, well, he...’

‘And you say he's a saint?’ the general added. ‘Who are you again?’

‘I'm Carmen de la Cierva, a sculptor, the Irish College commissioned me to carve a statue of Saint Ciarán...’

‘Where are you from?’

‘Madrid...’

‘Your documents.’

‘They... the car...’ Carmen stammered.

‘Here they are.’ Pedro showed their passports and laissez-passers.

General Márquez looked at them.

‘You're teachers from La Institución.’

They didn't answer.

‘And the boy is your nephew? How come you're not fighting for Spain, chico? Salamanca was bombed by the communists two weeks ago. How's Madrid doing?’

Ciarán felt as if the cold muzzle of Márquez's gun was already pressing against his nape.

‘Bad,’ he answered.

‘Get the baby,’ the soldier told him.

Ciarán took the bundle from Carmen’s arms. He was not used to holding her – and she started moving and making small noises. He was scared of squeezing too hard and hurting her, but his fingers were rigid and unresponsive. It was the cold. The baby smelled of pee and rain. He started to feel sick.

‘Too many academics, too few soldiers. It’s sad seeing Spain like this, don’t you think?’ Márquez said. ‘That’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen.’ He pulled out his automatic pistol and pointed at the statue.

‘No!’ Carmen tried to grab the gun.

Márquez shot Carmen.

She dropped to the floor.

Pedro screamed and hurtled towards the general.

Márquez shot him.

Blood rained all over Saint Ciarán.

El Toro’s eyes stayed blind.

The baby howled.

‘Fucking communists...’ Márquez said. There was blood in his face, too.

‘Virgen Santa... what in the name of...?’ Miguel stumbled. ‘This... this is murder, you...’ One of the monks held him.

The baby howled.

General Márquez pointed the pistol at Ciarán. He was numb with shock. It was not supposed to be like this. Where was the miracle? The miracle had to happen. Any time now.

‘Are you a fucking communist too? Are you?’ The general’s arm trembled.

The miracle.

Márquez’s finger moved to pull the trigger.

The marble bull stared back at the general. His head was up, his muzzle open. His horns were large and undulating. He was about to charge yet he remained quiet inside the stone. El Toro.

The baby howled.

‘He’s holding a baby, por Dios...’ One of the monks approached the soldier.

The baby howled.

Ciarán realised that his hands were like claws, squeezing the little body. And the baby kept howling, and howling, and nobody would make her shut up. He let her go.

‘Dios...’ the monk gasped when the baby dropped to the floor. Ciarán collapsed by her side, grabbed her with immense care and started unbuttoning his shirt.

‘What the fuck...’ General Márquez was still pointing the pistol at his head.

‘General Márquez, stop, stop now, please, this is the house of Dios...’ The monk held him back.

The baby’s howls felt like hard blows on Ciarán’s head. There was just one way to calm her. He took her to his breast. She took her to her breast. The baby’s face was red and her eyes were closed tight but she attached herself to the nipple. And sucked. Ciarán started shivering. He looked at the dark blood pouring slowly on the floor, she felt the milk flowing. He opened his mouth to wail. But there was nothing left inside her.

‘What on...’ General Márquez lowered the gun. ‘What...?’

The monks bowed down.

‘He’s Saint Ciarán...’

‘Saint Ciarán...’

They joined their hands in prayer.

‘He’s breastfeeding a baby...’ a soldier said.

‘That’s not...’

‘Look, look, come...’

‘Quick, quick.’

The soldiers crowded around Ciarán, the baby and the two corpses.

Don Miguel was crying.

‘Saint Ciarán please, forgive us...’

General Márquez, specks of blood still on his face, fell to his knees and struggled to cross himself with shaking hands.

‘It’s a miracle,’ he mumbled.

# **CASE FILE 477**



**CAMERA 556 – THE CORRIDOR**

The door opens. A woman in civilian clothes receives the boy standing outside.

‘Kerry? Ja, hoe gaat het? Thanks for coming.’

The boy enters and the door closes

<record> **DEEL 1.** *Jesus Christ crucified on a windmill*

Hermanas, ¿do you want to know the truth?

Alright, yeah, I won't lie. I'm not lying, I promise. Ja, ik ken het. I'll tell you. I'll tell you the truth.

<...>

Neo Dublin started sinking the day of the 333 Excommunications.

That night, I was at home in barco, ready to watch them. I switched the deskreen on. CHIS. CHAK. The buttons were all rusty. Damn barcos, that's what happened when you had to live on the waters.

The bells began to toll.

BONG.

BONG.

Nobody spoke in the Excommunications, pero joder, you heard the bells. They played them crazy.

BONG.

'Alcalá, it's starting,' I called to my sis. A paperbook flew from her cabin. It was Alcalá's way of saying she didn't fucking care. Pfff. Well, if she wanted to miss it.

'Keep off, I can't see.' I pushed Ree away. Ree was my step sister. She was thirteen, three years younger than me, pero three hundred times fatter, en serio. How she managed to be like that when everyone else was starving was a fucking miracle.

In the deskreen, a panoramic of Neo Dublin. The New Trinity College, the most important building in the city, where the Domini celebrated Missa y the Irish lived. Brown y black because of the acid rain. The clock was like the eye on a cyclop y marked ten to midnight.

BONG.

BONG.

Attached to the NTC, were the millions y millions of houses, like rotting cockles refusing to leave their rock. That's where all the Irish stayed, as faraway as they could from these fetid waters. Faraway from the Spanish.

There were spheric drones swimming in the grey skies, two antennae on each side. The Domini called them ‘Angeli’ y they were fucking right, the things watched you closer than your Guardian Angel. They recorded everything, y being watched meant you’d be caught committing sins, sooner rather than later. Everyone sins, like.

BONG.

Pass the NTC.

Black waters.

Shark reefs.

Bridges. Like mad fishing nets of greenish metal. Y under them were the grey piers y hundreds of barcos. ¿Did you ever hear of North Liffey’s bridge? That’s where our barco was. Pero the cameras didn’t even approach us because we were under the most repulsive of all bridges. The kind of place where you don’t want to get lost in the dark hours, ¿get me?

The deskreen showed the old submarine’s yard, where El Mercado de San Miguel hid. You could buy anything there, even synthetic Vitamilk, provided you had enough cash, that is, which was every Spaniard’s problem, ya ves.

Then, the camera showed a small corner of Fairview, with its ships’ graveyard, water bubbling in red rust. The Domini ignored the illegal bullfighting going on there. I knew it well, my mother being a bullfighter herself, a matador, we call it in Spanish.

The Crucifix Farms floating on two massive black decks.

BONG.

The camera zoomed to the Crucifix Farm on the left.

‘Ree, fuck off. You shouldn’t be watching this, you’ll puke or something.’

She didn’t move.

The windmills were like crucifixes, ¿sabes? They had small figurines of Jesus Christ attached. They kept going on y on, dark hours too, pumping their energy into Neo Dublin. The Domini said that they should remind us that the world is fed on suffering y pain. There’s no end to it, no end, ever.

BONG.

BONG.

The procession of green-robed Domini holding the golden cross halted. They were carrying a palanquin with a steel statue of the Virgin Mary, the only one crying for the sons who had betrayed her.

Tied up to five windmills were five men. Real men. Arms y legs tied to the blades. These windmills had been switched off. For the moment. The guys wore the yellow cloaks of fishermen. Fishing was banned. Only the Domini could be fishers, fishers of men, sí. Even retarded kids knew that. Sí, we hadn't seen synthetic cucumbers for months, we had the shortage of Vitamilk, y the SugarHots were expensive, which meant that 99% of the Spanish couldn't afford them. We were fucking hungry, like, all the fucking time. The illegal fish markets flourished everywhere. The smell of rotten fish gills made our stomachs roar, yet the fish were poisonous. Eat fish for three days, the fourth day you'll wake up with another hand growing on your ass. Mutations. So those days it was all about dying of hunger or cancer, pues eso. ¿Get the picture?

The camera zoomed in so we could see how the fishermen were trembling. They were probably shitting themselves too, pero you couldn't see that with all the white rain.

A Dominus, with a hand ladder, started covering each of the sinner's faces with a veil.

Uno.

Dos.

¿Do you repent, my son?

Tres.

Wait. I knew that fisherman. Fuck. I knew him. I knew it.

Mamá was not in the room. She didn't want to see the Excommunications either. I could hear her working down on the engine room of the barco. Mamá was weak. Pero she had told Da, (sí, the fisherman was my stepfather, pero I called him Da) stay away from the fish. Cannot be worse than your bullfighting, he used to answer her. Fishing will kill you first, Mamá said. Y there she was, damn right.

Cuatro.

Cinco.

BONG.

Ree started making ugly noises. Her lips formed an inverted ‘u’ y her face got all red. Crying. Fucking Irish. They think nothing can touch them. Ree was Da’s daughter, so she was Irish, like him, even if they’d decided to live in the slums with us. ¿Did Da think that being Irish would spare him the Excommunication? For once, the Domini were treating Spanish y Irish all equally. With his head covered, Da was just one of the sinners. About to be crucified.

BONG.

I wanted to scream at Ree: ‘don’t look now, don’t’.

Pero I couldn’t. My tongue was stuck in my mouth like a piece of iron, y my eyelids were glued open.

BONG.

The windmills started spinning. Slow at first, the bodies contorting, as though they were made of chewing SugarHosts. So unreal it was almost funny. Pero then the windmills kept moving y the red spilled y you knew it.

It was not a fucking nightmare. *</record>*

*<record>* **DEEL 2.** *Dad is gone pero Ree got new boots*

Next day was a school day at the New Trinity College.

Turbines wailing. Half-dead UVA lampposts. No ripples on the water.

FISHERMEN GO TO HELL signs.

Fuck.

The barcobús wasn’t coming. Waiting on the platform at North Liffey’s stop under the hard rain. Me, Alcalá, y Ree. All nauseous after what we had watched yesterday on the deskreen. All with hatraguas, goggles, ponchos. Drenched. We didn’t have enough money to buy Sunnaluz to waterproof our fucking selves. In front of us, a billboard.

YOU CAN’T REACH GOD’S HAND WHEN YOU’RE MASTURBATING.

Ree was wearing her new boots. Jodidas electric blue boots. They had ultra pink laces y fluorescent yellow spots y tooth-white soles. They were massive. Ree was so fat that everyone in her class called her sunfish, pero I called her vaca, so I did. That's Spanish for cow y annoyed her more. We were waiting for the barcobús. Ree bounced up y down. Mud stuck on the patches of her worn-out poncho. She didn't look at me.

Da was dead.

We knew it.

I dragged Alcalá's wheelchair closer to me. Alcalá was my older sister. The upper half of her body looked like the seventeen-year-old she was, pero her legs hadn't grown since she was seven. She was lucky, though. In North Liffey, kids y cripples drown all the time. You know, you can make jodidas water wings compulsory pero it's not like they were of any use. Skelpers were getting larger, I'm telling you. Silver y dusty black. Fast like knives. Not even talking about the stratospheric jumps an orca could make.

Da was dead.

Hermanas, I was thinking back then, that you clutched at things as hard as you could pero life would just take them away. La muy puta.

'Nice boots, eh,' I said.

Ree dipped her foot into the mud.

'Very nice boots.'

Ree kept digging up the mud with her jodidas expensive boots. Now, Hermanas, you've to understand that in North Liffey mud is toxic. Made from shit, oh yes, y the last body fluids of a thousand creatures that died in sickness.

'Stop it, you puta vaca.'

Her boots were completely submerged in that mierda.

'Putos shoes, joder, ¿did Da buy them for you? ¿Did he?' I touched Ree's shoulder. Maybe I grabbed it. 'Stop that, joder. It's your fault Da's dead.'

She froze.

'You kept asking for stuff y he had to buy you all that girly shit. Y now Da's dead,' I said.

‘He wasn’t your Da. He was *my* Da.’

‘Yeah, he was, y you fucked around asking for money y now he’s dead y you’re alone. You know where he is, ¿don’t you?’

‘I–’

‘Yes you do. The money for the boots, ¿did he...?’

‘Kee...’

Alcalá pulled my arm. She wore a respiradero outside, so she couldn’t manage to spit out a jodida word.

‘Botas de mierda. Your Da is dead because he didn’t have money to pay for these boots de mierda so he had to do the fishing thing. You go y bring your Da back. You go y bring him back, you jodida vaca,’ I said.

I wanted to kick Ree in the face. I wanted to take her hatraguas off y pull her hair until I burst her face.

‘Greedy vaca, vaca avariciosa de mierda.’

Alcalá’s respiradero started doing a whistling sound.

‘Stop that shit,’ I told Alcalá, ‘que te vas a ahogar, tonta.’

Y then I turned to Ree.

‘Fucking vaca, ¿see what you’re doing? ¿You want to fuck us all now?’

There were drops on Ree’s goggles. It wasn’t the rain. Y then, Hermanas, I felt I had won. She ran along the platform y climbed up the stairs to cross Cabra bridge. ¿Where was she going? I didn’t mind the least. I was too pissed off because Da was dead y I had to go to school anyways. </record>

<record> **DEEL 3.** *The butterfly angel tells me to kill Doll Face*

Pues, I was there in the classroom We had to move to the sixth floor since the ones below were flooded. Waters had been rising for months. Anyhow. Yes, classrooms in the New Trinity College were huge. Seriously. ¿Do you want me to describe them?

The walls were so thick that you couldn’t hear the rain. Y they weren’t mouldy, pero super white y corpse-cold. The floor was a metallic grid, always so warm y smoky. Myrrh. They buried the Irish under the NTC. They used myrrh to

cover the smell of rotting flesh. Those days, people were dying like flies, kids y old folks, mostly. Without Vitamilk they lost their teeth y they died.

Yeah, the ceiling was painted. There were obese clouds, y singing angels, y flowers y curly calves. I've memorised the classroom ceiling so well I can tell you all about that puto angel on the left corner, with buttery skin, holding a double flute y a bunch of jodidas flowers.

There were like thirty desks in front of the digiboard, pero I had my seat at the back. I went to an Irish class. Sí, boys with boys y girls with girls, it was like that. The Spanish kids went to different classes. I was the only cross-breed, half-Spanish y half-Irish, which meant they didn't know where the fuck to put me. Then, porque Father was Irish y a Dominus y a Master at the NTC, he got me enrolled on a fucking point based programme to get the Irish Card. That meant I got the right to be in an Irish class.

The classes always started with a small prologue in Irish, before changing to 100% Latin. That day Dominus Domitius started by telling us (again) about what happened After The Flood. We were never taught about Before The Flood, when there was land with tons of cities erected on it. That big, glorious chunk of land was supposed to be Europe, a place a million times worse than Sodom and Gomorrah. That's why Deus had cursed it with a second flood.

Dominus Domitius howled the usual nonsense from his seat in his scooter.

'Deus sent the rain to punish mankind...'

I spent my time carving a hole in the right side of my desk, using a paper clip.  
¿Can you imagine?

' But Deus spared the only true faithful race, the Irish, and sent them to the Iberian peninsula to bless the only patch of land left in the once so-called Europe. And the Irish brought the Spanish, the last remainers from the cursed continent, the Truth of Deus, allowing their sinful souls to dry in the afterlife...'

I looked at the ceiling, cursing the cheesy angels. After the Excommunicationes last night, all I wanted was to twist their wings. Poke their skin with my paper clip. Insert all those flowers in their culos, specially the roses.

KNOCK, KNOCK.

‘Come on in,’ Dominus Domitius said.

Someone entered the classroom.

The first thing I thought, ¡joder, es un tapón! I mean, he was so short. Like a ten-year-old. Long yellow hair with fringe. Milky skin. Pero not bad white because it wasn’t sick skin, if you get me. He had blue eyes y a doll face. His uniform was super new. The classroom was warm pero he was still wearing the jacket with the super big NTC logo on it. Y the clothes sparkled because they were completely covered in Sunnaluz, you know, like when you have so much of it on you that you can go outside without feeling your bones dissolving.

‘This young fellow comes from the Vatican Boat,’ Dominus Domitius told us, ‘and will stay on land with us for the time being.’

Whispers everywhere. I mean, the Vatican Boat, for fuck sake. Sometimes we saw it, bright like a jodido sun, sailing in the distance. Pero the Pope hadn’t put a foot on land for years, like. Who would want to stay in this dump, ¿no?

‘¿What’s your name, my boy?’ Dominus Domitius asked the new guy.

‘Sceilig’

What a stupid name, ¿right? Y he said it in a perfect posh Irish accent, no me jodas.

Sceilig came to sit in front of me y next to Sona. Of course, there was an empty desk there. The others wouldn’t come near me.

‘Dominus Domitius, ¿are we going to get Vitamilk today?’ Sona asked.

‘No, not today, and we won’t get it tomorrow if you keep asking. Fasting is a holy act and will bring you all closer to the Saviour,’ the Dominus answered.

‘But we’re not in Lent...’

‘¿Do you think Jesus Christ preached about fasting and purifying the soul just in Lent? And quiet now, my boy, or you’ll get the power stick.’

‘Maybe we can eat Kerry’s fat sister,’ Purts whispered from the fourth row.

Laughter.

‘That Ree, man, is like sunfish,’ Sona told Sceilig.

Laughter.

‘Quiet now, boys, or blood will be spilled,’ Dominus Domitius threatened while he typed some Latin in the digiboard.

All the classroom was looking at me, Sona y the fucking posh Irish kid, you see.

Sceilig smirked.

‘You know you’ve to beat him. He’s laughing at you.’

That was the buttery angel with the bunch of flowers y the double flute speaking.

‘Beat the shit out of him. Break that pretty face into pieces.’

‘Yeah,’ I promised the buttery angel. ‘Later.’ </record>

<record> **DEEL 4.** *El Diablo finds a way to put a cucumber inside my trousers*

Y pues, I waited.

Hermanas, I waited for Sceilig in the school graveyard. By the big doors, where two spiky statues hunched over. One was the Virgin Mary of the Anguish. The Steel Maria. The other one was rust-coloured marble naked Saint Ciarán riding a bull. The saint’s balls were like seaweed pips.

Sceilig came, of course, y I could see everyone was leaving him alone because sí, they knew. They hadn’t told him anything. We all have to learn from the blood. Even Íscar, Dominus Domitius’ altar boy, who was supposed to keep an eye on us during break time, looked the other way. Lead-coloured clouds rushed through the sky. It was raining so hard I could barely see.

I stepped in front of Sceilig.

‘¿What?’ he said.

I punched him in the face as quick y hard as lightening. Oh, that delicious crunch, his nose’s cartilage collapsing. He walked backwards. Fat drops of blood stained his sparkling Sunnaluzed jacket pero instead of holding his swelling nose, he charged at me.

He hit me with clenched fists.

Fuck.

I punched his stomach. It felt I was getting inside his ribcage.

He screamed like a broken flute. He fell.

I kicked his shoulder.

He grabbed my feet y I fell y I tasted the mud, Hermanas, so I did.

He punched my face.

He grabbed my hand y bit it like a rabid sea otter. I pulled his hair until I had some yellow in my hands, pero el muy jodido wouldn't stop, ah, no. My hand was throbbing with pain. I tried to suffocate him by pressing my knee on his throat, then hit his face. His forehead was red. His body was moving under mine, like. Mud splashed everywhere. The others were around us, screaming. My hand... I opened my mouth to groan y then he hit my chin y all went white. Y then pain in my nape, y he was on me. My hand was free, oh, so good, pero fucking Sceilig was hitting me as hard as he could with his tiny fists. I felt so warm. People were screaming.

'Kill him Kerry, kill him Kerry...'

'Kerry loco, Kerry loco.'

'Mad fucking bastard, get him there...'

I grabbed Sceilig's throat. He kept hitting pero I didn't care anymore. I pressed harder y harder. His hipbones seemed to puncture my stomach whenever he curled, trying to escape. I pressed harder.

I think I could have killed Sceilig, like the buttery angel told me to do. Bueno, Hermanas, that's not true at all, I just wanted to make him faint, so he would not hurt me anymore.

Something terribly disgusting happened.

I hit him so hard I sent him flying into the mud y I got up y ran away. The others might have believed that I saw one of the Domini coming or something. Or that it was my natural crazy behaviour. Pero, ¿sabes? El Diablo can take so many forms y paths, oh yes he can. Y El Diablo was between my legs, making me very uncomfortable. Like having a synthetic cucumber inside my trousers. I remembered that white curve in Sceilig's neck, so I did. Sí. I ran. </record>

<record> **DEEL 5.** *Wild Spanish girls*

I came home from school completely battered.

I've seen some of you also live on barcos, pero, ¿have you seen our floating shacks? Mamá was the only Spanish who didn't mind living on a barco because she loved it. She loooooved it. Each plank, each board, each gear from the engine. When me y Alcalá were little we rode the oceans in the barco instead of being stuck in Neo Dublin, like.

Pues I crawled inside the barco like a sticky sea worm. Mamá y Alcalá were the only ones there. Mamá was fixing the barco's satellite disc.

Since Da had been taken by the Inquisitors and then killed there was always something wrong with the barco. Sí, Hermanas, there was something wrong, pero with Mamá. She was fucking goods with machines, like nothing you've ever seen before. She knew how to reduce a barco to pieces y then put it all together, better than before. Y yet the gilipollas of the NTC wouldn't allow her to work as an engineer. ¿Seriously? Pero oh, yes, they would offer her a job cleaning toilets. Shit y Spaniards, they go well together.

‘¿Dónde está?’ Mamá asked, because she didn't give a fuck Spanish was banned y she used it to speak to us all the time, like.

I squatted in front of the deskreen next to Mamá. There were screwdrivers y gums scattered all over the floor. She was hacking the satellite dish again so we could watch *Space Ducks* y other sinful programmes instead of the Vigil Missa.

‘¿Is there any food?’ I asked, although I already knew the answer.

Without Vitamilk, there was only rancid SugarHosts we dissolved in water to make the most revolting gruel you've ever seen.

‘Ree's not here. ¿Dónde está?’ Mamá grabbed my shoulder.

I had seen my stepsister running away in the morning. When the barcobús eventually came, she wasn't there to take it. ¿Had she gone to school at all?

‘Don't know, get off, you stink.’

Mamá's fingers were black with grease y now my uniform was dirty.

‘Tú sabes dónde anda,’ she said.

Hermanas, I've to admit that I started thinking about Ree then. It was this time of day that the vagabundos start going out, looking for free ways to get Sunnaluz or a shot of V-D. Ree was a sunfish of sweet eyes. Presa fácil.

Pues I left the barco through the back door. I put my hatraguas on, zipped up my poncho y wiped the mud off my goggles. I always wore the goggles, inside y outside, porque my eyes were weak y they turned into itchy tomatoes pretty fast. Father, I mean, my biological Father, used to say that was Deus' will, pero I'm telling you, it was the jodida polluted rain.

I walked the swinging bridges up y down, Cabra, Phibsborough, King, North Bolton y Parnell, cursing y asking everyone I stumbled on.

‘¿Seen my sister? Ginger hair, short, fat like a sunfish. ¿Seen her?’

I found her at the corner of a junk food store at the end of O'Connell Bridge. It said *Best Fish & Olives in town* pero they forgot to add *& radioactive oil*. I swear, Hermanas, in these places they cooked the dead fish that came floating on the surface each morning because factories had been throwing up mierda all night long.

Ree was not alone, though. A bunch of Spanish teenage girls circled round her. Poking her y pulling at her poncho.

‘¿A dónde vas, vaca?’

‘Eh, mira, que se nos pone tímida y todo...’

‘¿Y esas botas? Qué chulas, ¿no? ¿Can I have your boots?’

There were three of them, flashy holy cards pinned on their own ponchos. I think St Aidan y, of course, Jesus, were in that week.

Ree was a baby mouse without teeth, like.

‘Eh, largando. Que es mi hermana,’ I told the girls.

They all turned back.

‘She can't be your sis, a ver, ¡no os parecéis en nada!’.

‘Dáselas, guarra,’ I said to the girl who was holding Ree's new boots.

‘¿Qué?’

‘Dáselas, guarra.’

I punched the girl's face so hard that her upper lip exploded in blood. The others took out their iron rosaries y used them like flails. I kicked, hit, bit, pero there's a limit on how many times anyone can get the holy cross smashed into his head.

Al final, Hermanas, you'd be glad to know that I got Ree out of trouble. I let the Spanish girls take the boots because they were a jodido eyesore.

We walked pass Fairview to get back home.

Rust.

'¿Do you...?' Ree said.

'Nah.'

I wiped the blood off my face. My right forearm had started to swell. One of the girls had stabbed it. Bah. In North Liffey, sea-mosquitoes' bites were way worse. Plus, my right arm had always been shorter y slower to move anyways.

'Your face...'

'Shut up.'

The mud felt ice-like. I was walking barefoot because Ree was wearing my Sunnaluzed shoes, the expensive ones Father bought me to wear with the NTC uniform.

I was happy though.

Ree wouldn't wear those horrible electric blue boots anymore.</record>

<record> **DEEL 6.** *Infernum is at the end of Jacob's ladder*

Wow. My mouth is all dry now. ¿Could I have something to drink, alstebliedt? Sí.

<...>

Joder, this is good. Yeah. ¿What's this?¿ Sinaasappelsap? Si-naas-a-ppel-sap. Ja. Got it.

Hermanas, I'm thinking now about what happened three years ago, when I was a sweet little boy of thirteen. Domini said the Infernum lay beneath our feet, under

dark waters y starving skelpers y hammerheads. At the NTC we were told that Infernum was that bottomless swamp right behind the NTC (that's where they threw people after their bodies had been torn into pieces during the Excommunications). We would sink in there forever if we didn't submit our online daily confession, or reject thoughts such as Ree's massive white tits, like raw SugarHost muffins.

Pero the best depiction of the Infernum was in the Oratorium, in the mural that covered the circular walls and depicted a huge cavern where humanity endured never ending rain. You could see by the size of the raindrops that they ruptured the skin. There weren't hatraguas or Sunnaluzed ponchos there. Dominus Domitius assured us that the stench of thousands of humans rotting together would be so abominable that we wouldn't have time to puke because we would be ripping off our own noses instead.

¿Water? ¿Rain? Hermanas, I'm not afraid of them. When I was little, Mamá didn't buy me fancy water wings pero taught me how to dive in water y mud. I could swim so fast that skelpers didn't have time to bite me. I was basically immune to the poisoned waters. Y I could also keep my breath for almost twenty minutes. Cool, ¿eh?

Hermanas, I'm gonna tell you a secret: the Infernum is at the end of Jacob's ladder. Yeah, that ladder Dominus Domitius made me climb once. He knew I was responsible for burning the Steel María's crown. I know I shouldn't have done it. Pero I'd bet ten harps that the steel wool crown would explode into rabid pink flames. ¿Don't you love fire, Hermanas? Whenever you have it in front of you, burning in all its glory, ¿don't you see the rest of the world under a different light?

Fire is so sun-like.

Dominus Domitius couldn't punish me officially because he didn't have any proof. Pero he hated me so much. He hated Father, too. All the Domini did because Father had use his Papal Dispensation to marry a Spanish woman and raise half-breed children. I guess in their eyes it was as if someone married a sea slug and bred with it, like. So he made me go to his office y from there we went up the private corridors. Íscar, his altar boy, followed behind us, a well-trained water cockroach he was, like. Dominus Domitius had started riding a scooter then. His legs were useless, y his skin was dark brown, like an old toad, because of the excess of V-D. He always carried a

little box in the front basket of his scooter, where (or so he said) lay the uncorrupted corpse of a new-born calf. Land animals were not born in Neo Dublin anymore, pero you could always put one harp or two inside the calf's box to thank the Steel Maria for that miracle. Irish had money to spare, ¿you know?

Dominus Domitius stopped in front of a narrow door.

‘Go inside and get me the Book of Kells. You’re going to copy so many versicles your fingers are going to burst before you finish.’

Pues I opened the door, already smiling. ¡What a stupid task! Pero I didn’t see any room, just a metallic ladder against the wall.

My eyes itched when I started climbing. That ladder was possessed because it kept spiralling y rolling up whirlpool-like. No air to breathe. Sweat in my upper lip y nausea in my stomach. I kept going up. I couldn’t look down. My legs were wobbly like a pair of sea worms. There was no air to breathe. I couldn’t look down. My hands were sweaty. My mouth tasted of herrumbre because I’d been biting my tongue porque I didn’t want to scream. The ladder contorted. A clock mechanism echoed from above. I was about to go into the NTC clock room, the highest point in the building. Joder. The treads were slippery. I couldn’t look down. I couldn’t move. The treads were melting. ¡I was going to fall! I shrank my body y embraced the ladder as hard as I could, y closed my eyes y ears, so I did.

Screams.

Maybe it was me.

How Dominus Domitius discovered my fear of heights, I never knew. Perhaps Father had told him.

I stayed there, hanging on that ladder for hours. At some point, Father climbed up to get me.

‘¿Do you repent, my son?’

I couldn’t pronounce a word, pero I kissed the Fisherman Ring on his hand.

Then he covered my goggles so I didn’t have to see the infernal ladder anymore y got me down.</record>

<record> **DEEL 7.** *Ree tries to sink our barco, with all of us in it!!!*

The morning after I brought Ree home, Mamá summoned us all: Alcalá, Ree y me.

Everyone dropped their water wings, ponchos y hatraguas before sitting. I left the hot water filled cushions around the table for the girls y planted my ass on our online *Lives of Saints*'s projector, family size. Father had bought it for us pero it had been broken for ages (I poured hot Vitamilk over it, when we still had lots to spare...) Mamá didn't seem to find the time to fix it.

The boat trembled. Ree came crawling from the toilet, her index finger still bleeding after the daily confession. Sí, we had daily blood tests to check our Vitamin D levels in case we needed a larger dose during the Sunday Missa. Ree's hair was loose y messy y she smelled of dusty pillows y humid sheets. All places (including barcos) were supposed to have a private confessional space. Pero Mamá said our barco was too small y that, in any case, the toilet was already a very private place, so that's where she installed the confessor. Hermanas, I admit it was quite good to take a shit while I was recording my daily sins. I always came out from the toilet feeling truly liberated.

Mamá opened her mouth, pero I interrupted her.

'Venga, danos la gran noticia.'

'Yeah, Da's dead. Y the money is gone.'

She seemed ok when she said it. She was wearing a blue striped jumper, pero she hadn't changed it for a whole week. It smelled of rotten Sunnaluz. Her curly hair hung lifeless over her shoulders. Mostly silver. She hadn't dyed it in months.

'Da had to go fishing because he was sick of you...' I said, 'y the Matadores.'

My words dissolved Mamá's composed face.

'Da took all our money to get into fishing, they caught him y now he's dead, ¿didn't you get that, pea-brain?' Alcalá said. 'Y cierra la puta boca.'

I wanted to remind Alcalá that Da was the one who bought her that fancy wheelchair with an attached deskreen y all. Y the money had come from the fishing, sí, ¿where else?

Ree chewed the solid pieces of sugar floating in warm, desalinated water. The ends of her hair soaked in it. When she was finished, she cleaned the bowl with her

finger y licked it. I wonder if she was going to do the same with her hair. She didn't look at us.

'It's ok,' Alcalá said. 'We can do this.'

'¿Without jodido money?' I replied.

'I've another corrida soon,' Mamá said.

'Sí, sure,' I answered. '¿Going to come back from this one?'

During the day, Mamá cleaned toilets in the NTC, pero at night she joined a group of mechanics, the Matadores. They fixed monstrous drones called toros, sí, bulls. These drones were a mix between a race boat y a tank, like. Y Mamá didn't just enjoy building the drones. She also jumped in the pool y fought against them. She was a good swimmer y knew the machines so well. Pero now y again she got in trouble. She had a scar on the left side of her face (you could still see the stapler marks) y had lost her ear. Pretty revolting, that scar. Every time she had a corrida, we all knew that could be the last time we saw her. Which was, bueno, very exciting.

'I can work too.'

'¿You?' I laughed at Alcalá. With her shaved hair y her dragonfly body. 'No seas gilipollas, you can't even walk.'

Alcalá grabbed an empty can of Sunnaluz y threw it at my face. My first impulse was to make her swallow it, pero then, my sis is the only one I'd never raise a hand to.

'Parad ya.' Mamá massaged her temples.

'¿Am I leaving?' Ree asked.

'¿What?' Mamá said.

'¿Am I leaving?'

'No, ¿what're you talking about?'

'My da is gone.' I hated her for that *my*, ¡he had been living in our barco for five years! 'I don't know where my mother is...'

'Oye.' Mamá tried to take her hand pero changed her mind midway y left it on the table. 'You're not going anywhere.'

Mamá always ignored all that mierda about Irish y Spanish having to live in different places. Y people in North Liffey respected her, so nobody would put a finger on little Ree anyways.

‘Yes, we’re all a jodida happy family,’ I said.

Mamá hit the table.

‘¿Te callas? ¿Can you just shut up? If you don’t want to be here, just go.’

Her voice was sharp y her eyes reddened. Alcalá shook her head y dragged herself back, grabbing one of her paperbooks from the floor. Ree started crying, y this time Mamá caressed her hair. Ree collapsed on her y started soaking Mamá’s shoulder in snot and tears. They were like a picture from the NTC: the Virgin Mary of the Beautiful Love (who was also North Liffey’s patron, no kidding) holding an ugly fat kid. The only problem was, Mamá was not a jodida Virgin y much less a saint. I wanted to tear Ree off her.

‘Venga ya, you’re such a jodida drama queen,’ I told my stepsister before crawling down to my cabin.

The annoying sound of a drop failing from the ceiling into a sack of toilet sawdust in the opposite corner had been saying it all day, loud y clear. Hermanas, we already had enough water there, we didn’t need more jodidas tears to sink the puto barco. </record>

<record> **DEEL 8.** *Smoked orca tapas*

So, a few days afterwards, Father dragged us to this religious feast in Mater Misericordiae Lake. To see this nun with special powers, like. Back then, I thought that anything related to Deus was pura mierda. The Domini spoke of mud, darkness y the wet Infernum, while standing in opulent rooms: walls covered in golden leaves y crucifixes so full of diamonds you would think Jesus died suffocated by them. Y when they slapped you it hurt like hailstorm, porque their fingers were loaded with sapphires y amethysts.

Father was one of them, although not that rich. Because he had mixed himself with Spaniards he had never been promoted and remained in the lowest ranks of the

NTC, basically wiping all the other Domini's asses. Yet, ¿you think he was less faithful to them? Hell no. Whenever we were with him we had to attend the online Missa two jodidas times a day y not sitting, ¡pero kneeling! on the floor. Y floors in the NTC attached houses were made of marble.

‘You’ve to turn El Diablo away from your soul, Kerry,’ he told me all the time.

Sometimes his eyes were full of tears y I wanted to puke. Hermanas, truth is that I never saw any light in Father's eyes. No Deus, nothing.

Pero the thing I hated the most about Father was how mad he got whenever he saw my crippled sister y how many stupid, expensive, useless y painful medical treatments he made her undergo. I'm thinking now of those iron clamps they put inside her legs to stretch the bones (the ones that got infected). Or when he paid one thousand harps (all his savings, like) to a woman called Maria Inoculata, a *saint*, so she would personally bless my sis. ¿Do you also have cripples everywhere? I have my dumb right arm, ¿see? Domini said that Deus sent the poisonous rain to punish our sinful bodies. Father said:

‘Your sister's defect is my punishment for leading such a impious life when I was young.’

That made me puke. What a ton of mierda.

Me, Father, Alcalá y Ree weren't the only ones on the creaking bridge over Mater Misericordiae Lake. A crowd of curious y believers were gathering there too, perhaps tented by the not-so-bad drizzling rain, ignoring the hazard signs saying that this bridge was too old to stand on. What a joke. Everything in North Liffey was too old y clapped-out to stand on, starting with our jodidos barcos.

I saw a few Irish. Dominus Domitius was there, y a large queue had already formed to peek inside his calf-box, pero mostly there were only Spaniards. Whenever you didn't have enough money to buy a hospital voucher, you would go to these kind of things.

¿Think this woman is a real saint?’ Íscar asked me.

He was taking a break to munch on SugarHosts while Domitius y his box enjoyed all the attention.

I knew Íscar well. His barco had been parked next to ours for a year now. He woke up before five in the morning every Sunday, singing The Irish Rover while emptying the piss y shit tanks from every single barco in our pier. This was his duty, apart from paying us all extra rent. Sí, I know, Íscar was pretty unlucky. Pero that was because he was a Raro, with Chinese eyes y yellow skin. That is why he couldn't live in the NTC. Irish hated Spanish y Spanish hated Raros. Pero, Hermanas, ¿you know what? He was making money being Dominus Domitius' altar boy, because he was always wearing a tight black poncho sparkling with Sunnaluz y chewed SugarHosts, all the day, like.

'It's going to be a fucking waste of time,' I said.

He passed me a host, nodding.

'Wow, look at that,' Íscar said, pointing out a boy in the crowd wearing a NTC uniform.

A NTC uniform outside the NTC, no me jodas. ¿Guess who was that? Sceilig, of course, or shall I call him Doll Cracked Face, because he still had the marks of our first encounter. There was a tall woman by his side, y I realised Íscar was actually pointing at her. Now, Hermanas, pay attention here, don't forget her. She was Sister Ciarana, although I didn't have a fucking clue about that yet. I recognised her as a nun, though, because of the white scapular over the black tunic. She wore a white cornette that looked like a pair of horns. She was one of the Sisters of Cow. I'd never seen one before. They never left the Vatican boat. That's where all the real cows lived. I'm talking about the only real cows in the whole world. The Sisters of Cow milked them to produce the Vitamilk, which was then blessed by the Pope himself. ¿A Sister of Cow walking around Neo Dublin? They were fucking angels, like, almost. Y Sceilig by her side, all made sense then. She was Sceilig's mother, I mean, her hands were nailed to his shoulders. No, nuns couldn't have children, pero the Sisters of Cow were the only ones who could conceive without any sin. Or were fucked by the Pope himself. Whichever story you like best. No wonder Sceilig was such a freak.

Everyone screamed 'oooooh'.

¿Deus' sign? Pero no, people screamed because of these three men moving among the crowd. They had the yellow robes of fishermen, pero under them they wore

red habits. Yes, the red habit meant Inquisitor. They patrolled the streets, mimicking the normal folks until they saw something that was not Catholic enough. They all carried harpoons in their backs y at that moment we all realised they were not going to make orca's tapas.

The whispering grew louder than the pissing rain.

Father stepped between the Sister of Cow y the Inquisitors.

'Deus bless you,' Father said to them.

'Deus te benedicat, dominus,' one Inquisitor replied. His face was not visible under the massive hatraguas. 'Exeunt.'

'I'm here to get my daughter cured,' Father said. 'If that is Deus' will.'

'Exeunt,' the faceless Inquisitor said. Meetings of more than three Spanish people were forbidden, ¿you know? Pero it was rare that the Inquisitors bothered to pay us a visit in our crappy neighbourhood. Specially then, with all the starvation thing going on.

The other two Inquisitors shoved people away.

'Putos,' an old man whispered.

'You're offending Deus,' a woman complained.

'We're not doing anything wrong,' Ree said.

The faceless Inquisitor pushed her away.

Ree kicked him y the fucker gave her a smack across the face.

'You asshole,' Alcalá said, y ran her wheelchair into the man.

The Inquisitor raised his harpoon.

Alcalá got nervous y tried to go backwards.

Ree shouted.

'¡La niña!' Someone screamed.

BLONG.

BLONG.

¿Celestial bells?

It happened in one second, Hermanas, pero the bridge over Mater Misericordiae crunched y broke, right where Alcalá's wheelchair was standing.

SPLASH.

Y down she went.

We didn't even hear her screaming.

'La niña,' a woman said.

Ree yelled.

'Go down, go down y get her,' a man said.

'The girl, the girl has f—'

It was all fucking chaos. I don't really remember it well, pero I sort of reconstructed the facts after that. See, my sister fell into the water y sank like a fat stone. Everyone panicked pero one person: Sister Ciarana. She jumped into the waters to save Alcalá before the orcas gulped her down (wheelchair y all).

So the nun dived down y managed to get my sister before swimming towards a barco anchored under the bridge, pero things got a bit complicated. See, there were ripples in the brown water. Y bubbles. Tons of bubbles. Skelpers. So many bubbles.

Sister Ciarana had to swim among hordes of hungry skelpers before making it to the barco's deck. She left my sister there (who was nothing but a bundle of wet clothes) y then climbed on to it. Her habit was dripping blood. Arms with open wounds.

A black triangle pointed out of the waters. Orca sniffing the blood.

I watched all this from the bridge. One of the Inquisitors appeared by my side.

'Deus will save her, my boy...'

I punched his face y got his harpoon.

An orca jumped out. Red gapping maw.

I threw the harpoon.

I missed.

The orca swam beneath the boat. A wave hit the deck. Another came, almost immediately. I understood what the orca was trying to do: create a wave big enough to wash off the nun y bring her to the waters again. The nun crawled back on the deck while holding Alcalá.

'Deus.'

'Deus, help them.'

'You, help them.'

A woman wearing an orange poncho was pointing at the Inquisitors.

The one with the red stream running out of his nose gurgled.

‘Tell Deus to save them.’

‘Eso, salvadlas.’

‘Sí, we want a miracle.’

‘We want a miracle now.’

‘Right now.’

‘Vamos, putos.’

At first people were just pulling the Inquisitor’s ponchos pero then they were grabbing them in all directions.

A scream.

Someone else hit the water.

¿Do you want to know who? The crowd had thrown one of the Inquisitors in the lake, thinking his miraculous powers would save Alcalá y the nun. Or perhaps they were all very angry, ¿no? In any case, it worked. The orca went quick as light for its new prey. Sí, sí, in the end all the Inquisitors turned into orca’s food.

In the middle of all that mess, people helped the nun, who was still holding my sister, to get up to the bridge again.

As soon as Sister Ciarana was back on the bridge, I ran towards her.

‘My sister, cura a mi hermana, por favor. Cura a mi hermana. Sálvala. Tienes que salvarla, sálvala, sálvala, es mi hermana, mi hermana.’

I grabbed the nun’s habit.

Mud, salt, blood.

‘Es mi hermana, es mi hermana, it’s my sister, my sister.’

Sister Ciarana looked directly at me. Wind had pulled her cornette back y seaweed hung from her dirty gold hair. Instead of wearing a habit, it seemed she was carrying a nauseating portion of the ocean with her. It smelled of carrion, illness y acid shit. ¿Were those things on her face freckles or mud drops? Sister Ciarana’s eyes. I looked into them just before someone grabbed me back. They were the colour of the sea under the sun. I’ve never seen such a thing pero, Hermanas...

I knew it. </record>

<record> **DEEL 9.** *The Steel Maria is listening (not really, pero someone's out there)*

What I'm going to tell you here is the truth. Hermanas, you might think, well, this jodido guy has just lost it, or perhaps he wants to add some spices to his olives, you know, to make things up or something. Pero no, I, we, all saw what happened that day porque we were there. Deus, El Diablo or the Steel Maria if you want, put us on that fucking bridge, I'm telling you.

Before that day, I used to think my life was mierda.

Laughs.

Insults.

Blows.

Boys screaming.

Beating.

Chasing.

Ree's milky skin.

I wanted to smell it.

To bite it.

I couldn't.

Mamá working at the NTC.

Her corridas.

Da, on the cross.

Bueno, pues that was nothing, Hermanas, nothing.

Nothing compared to seeing my sister in Sister Ciarana's arms. A mess of mud y limbs y wet clothes y seaweed. She wasn't Alcalá. She wasn't. She couldn't be. I wanted to shout at the nun SHE ISN'T, pero the pain in my brain had frozen my whole body.

The nun looked back at me.

'Mi hermana...' I managed to say.

I kept looking at the nun, feeling I was going to throw up my heart.

She nodded.

I knew I had made a deal. Something had listened to me, y it was the Steel Maria if you want. To be honest, I didn't care, joder, porque I had been listened to for the very first time in my life.

Sister Ciarana kneeled on the bridge, holding my sister close.

People gathered closer.

I felt the light pouring all over me. My eyes ached y my flesh burned. Acid drops ran down my chin. It wasn't rain, it was sweat. ¿Was this real sun in my skin?

COUGH.

Alcalá was coughing.

The dirty sky glowed.

Hermanas, my goggles were filled with water. It was like opening the only window in a narrow house. FUSSSSSS. Fresh currents of air breaking in. I knew, from that day on, that there would be a price to pay, though. I had asked, I had been listened to. The deal had been closed y I'd have to give something in return.

The nun never said it pero, Hermanas,

I knew it. </record>

<record> **DEEL 10.** *Blessed V-D for everyone, oh yeah*

Next day it was Sunday y joder you wouldn't believe it, pero we went to Missa at the NTC all together. Failing to attend brought Excommunication, the fancy word for we're-going-to-tie-you-to-a-windmill. You could watch these on Sunday evening on TV, live stream y all, pero you didn't want to have the lead role in the next one, no.

Además, there was another good reason to attend Missa. ¿Where else could we get a shoot of V-D? Sí, there was the illegal market, pero it had its cost y Spaniards couldn't gather even enough to buy Sunnaluz.

I pushed Alcalá's new wheelchair. I was a bit concerned in case other boys saw me, sure. Pero I would break their jaws if they laughed. Alcalá had been in a comatose state since she fell into the waters.

'Vamos... ¿you coming?'

Mamá struggled to follow us, hands covered in black bandages. Jodidos toros. She had used all the money from her last corrida to buy a new wheelchair for Alcalá. She couldn't forgive herself for what had happened (not being there when Alcalá almost died). Mamá's skin was yellowish y covered in sweat. Tonta. She didn't want to spend money on painkillers.

'Kerry... wait for her.'

'Mierda.'

On Rory O'More bridge we mixed with the dark mass of wet folks who were heading to the NTC. ¿Do you want me to describe it? ¿Again? Thick steel cables, tentacles-like, wrapped the building, perpetually keeping it from sinking into the waters. The rain-stained windows were hundred of mouths vomiting darkness. Shiny plastic angels stood as snipers on the windowsills. The waters surrounding the NTC sparkled in gold y garnet y if you looked down you could see the crucifixes covered in diamonds. Indulgentii. Sí, rich Irish pay for them y then threw them in the water so Deus would forgive their sins. ¿Does it make any sense to you? I always felt like diving in to get one y be jodidamente rich the rest of my life. Pero it was not that easy: some of the ghostly white crosses were camouflaged hammerheads.

The embarkment was at the end of Rory O'More. The ferry that came to take us was not bigger than a sperm whale so it didn't accommodate more than thirty people – all of them standing y squeezing together, like sinners in the Infernum Ah, there was also this projector with images of Noah's Ark. With the sound of animals in that recording, it all seemed like a zoo. ¿Can you imagine, the sweat y flatulences mixed with rotten seaweed y children getting sick? It was specially bad if some of them had been eating pepper crabs for breakfast. Pero that day I didn't joke with my sister about that. Before we could step out, Dominus Ahenobarbus, who had a nose like a rotten-potato, made the sign of the cross on our foreheads, while we kneeled y showed him our cross-necklace-ID.

'Deus te benedicat.'

'Deus te benedicat.'

I had to show Alcalá's because she wouldn't move.

Inside the NTC chapel, rain made the stained glass windows cry. Moving candles, on the ceiling, reflected purple y yellow in hundreds of sleepy faces. On the walls, versicles winked at us in pink neon.

AND DIOS SAID, LET THERE BE RAIN.

JESUS SHINES DOWN ON YOU ALL.

PRAY TO DRY YOUR SOUL.

As always, there were screens featuring chapters from the Book of Kells playing all at the same time, buzzing like wasp hives. I can feel the smell even now. (Myrrh y electricity.) We (Irish y Spanish happily together) knelt on the individual plastic mats y put the headphones on. Dominus Domitius' angry speech was so loud you felt your brains were going to commit suicide by throwing themselves through your ears, like. There was no volume control or anything. He talked about the same old mierda:

Infernum.

Punishment.

Sin.

We were all condemned to endure the rain porque humanity was miserable.

We let the son of Deus die, ¿what can be expected from such a cruel race?

From time to time he would get so excited that one of his crutches (he never said Missa sitting on his scooter) would fall, CLASH, y someone would scream.

‘¡Save me, Deus!’

Or:

‘¡María, protect us!’

After that, the Flood Songs came. Of course, I just moved my lips y looked down, as Mamá taught me. Ree was really into it, though, she even had tears running down her cheeks.

And finally, we all queued to receive the Communio.

I looked up when I saw Sceilig walking towards the altar. He had plasters on his nose y on his chin. ¿Had he been into another fight? Something warm poured into my hips. Even with a black eye, he was still some pretty thing. Hermanas, I felt nauseated after having that thought.

On the altar, Sceilig made the sign of the cross y mouthed:

‘Sanguis Christi.’

He extended his bare arm. It was thin y ivory-like. Dominus Domitius took a disposable syringe from the chalice that Íscar held y gave Sceilig an injection of V-D. The old toad seemed to enjoy it. Puto. ¿Was Sceilig feeling the frozen liquid ascending through his veins? ¿Was he feeling a cold chill y the start of nausea? He licked his lips y took a piece of cotton from the paten to press the wound.

‘Amen.’

He kissed Dominus Domitius’s Fisherman Ring before walking away.

It was disgusting. </record>

<record> **DEEL 11** *Sending sinful souls all the way up to Heaven*

Sí, sí, liking other boys was sin, sex was sin, all fun was sin if you were a Catholic, there’s no discussion about that. Sí, I’m telling the truth. ¿Why do you look at me like it’s so hard to believe? I swear. Seriously. Making out... no, even thinking about making out with someone of the same sex was the very worst. Ever. ¿You checking to see if my story is true? Ha, ha, ha. ¿Why would I lie? Look at me. Look. I have nothing. Just this story to tell. This, all this, here, in this room, this chair. I was born to be here, at this precise moment. To tell. Y you are all here, to listen. I couldn’t just fuck all this up.

<...>

On Thursday I decided to take Alcalá outside the barco.

She hadn’t said anything since the accident. Her mouth was a straight line. Her eyeballs were two enormous onyx marbles about to fall from her sockets.

We just had SugarHosts to give her (Pope-blessed, according to the package, though).

‘Don’t move her,’ Ree said.

She hadn’t left Alcalá’s side since the accident. She had been doing all sort of stupid things: putting a stinky blanket on her legs y trying to feed her SugarHosts dissolved in warm water with a straw. I mean, ¿what? Of course Ree drank it all herself whenever Alcalá spat the straw out y turned her head. Sí, Ree was a vaca.

‘Joder, I’m fucking sick of you. ¡Get off!’ I pushed Ree away.

She complained, pero there was no one there to hear her wailing. Mamá was back with the Matadores fixing a new toro.

I took Alcalá to the pier. Her new wheelchair was made of lasered steel, Hermanas, y it looked so neat. I wished my sis had been made of lasered steel too.

I tried to put the respiradero on her pero she groaned.

‘Venga.’ I forced it on her pero Alcalá’s face turned red y her eyes filled up with tears. ‘Coño, vale ya.’

I threw the respiradero away. She went quiet. Her chest was going up y down, pero nothing happened. Her eyes closed y her lips dropped. Joder. Hermanas, I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. It was raining outside. Just that was more than enough to have Alcalá coughing y having all sorts of trouble breathing.

Y now she fell asleep, outside, in the rain, like a jodido baby.

¿Another miracle? Hermanas, I felt scared, I can tell you this now.

I decided to do something fun. I had a bunch of bangers. They were hidden inside an airtight can of Sunnaluz that I kept under the water, tied up to the pier with a rope. Smart, I know. They weren’t fancy or anything. If I’d had money I’d have bought more jodido Sunnaluz first, ¿okay? I’d made those bangers myself y they were fucking lethal.

¿You know? The Irish had billions of these plastic figurines of saints: Noah, Saint Brendan, Jesus, Saint Patrick... They changed them every season. They gave them away for free, all over the city, along with printed prayers y stuff. So I used to cut the plastic heads off y pierce them with a nail, pass a string through them, fill them up with gunpowder y... ¡BUM!

Alcalá used to love that. Setting the waters on fire, she'd say, ohhh yeah.

I put some bangers on her hands. She opened her eyes when she felt the warmth. Pero she was not quick enough to throw them. So I did it for her, porque I didn't want to set her on fire. I mean, c'mon.

It was so jodidamente pretty. Glittery rain, PZZZZZZZ, dying in pinkish red y green y then disappearing forever in the black waters. I laughed. Alcalá laughed. Alcalá laughed like crazy. Her voice outside sounded strange, naked without the buzzing of the respiradero.

BANG.

BANG.

Íscar came to complain about sparks falling on his jodido deck.

'Cierra la puta boca or I'll throw one in your face,' I shouted at him. 'Go back to your fucking city, ¡shut up!'

That was when Sceilig appeared, walking towards us. He was wearing (¡once again!) that jodido uniform. The trousers were dirty with mud, though. In North Liffey, mud was so thick that no matter how much Sunnaluz you put on, you drowned in it anyways. He was looking all edgy y when I threw a bit of mud into the water, he jumped as if he had seen an orca, like.

Hermanas, he was funny.

'Hey Kerry,' little Sceilig said to me, taking his goggles off. His irises were the kind of blue you'd never see in those poisonous waters. Like the sky used to be. Maybe.

Alcalá focused her eyes on him.

'Eh, tú, ¿qué coño quieres?' Her fingers tried to push the wheelchair's buttons to move forward pero she was too weak.

It was the first time she had spoken since the accident.

Sceilig looked at me.

'He's Irish. No habla español,' I told Alcalá. 'He's a classmate.'

'¿Whaaat...?' Alcalá bursted into laughter. She was high on SugarHosts. Great.

‘Hey, ¿what the fuck are you doing here?’ I asked Sceilig. There was still quite a distance between us. We were by the barco, whereas Sceilig stood next to the bridge.

‘Here.’ He handed me a blue plastic box. Painkillers in the form of cherub’s ugly faces. The expensive kind. ‘¿Thought she may need them?’

‘We’re fine,’ I said, pero I grabbed them, so I did. For Mamá.

‘They’re cool,’ Sceilig said, meaning my bangers, of course.

¿What was going on?

‘Look, you better get the fuck out. They don’t like Irish boys around here, ¿you know?’

‘I’m not Irish.’ Sceilig came closer.

Alcalá looked at him y laughed a bit more. A thread of saliva hung from her lips.

‘¿Can I take one?’ Sceilig asked.

‘You’re a jodido Irish.’ I pushed him away from my sister. Y the bangers.

‘Irish are from Ireland. ¿Where is Ireland, you smart ass? I’m from around here, the same as you.’

I pushed him again.

‘Don’t call me smart ass, gilipollas.’

‘Whatever,’ he said. ‘Look at these...’

He took something out of his pocket.

‘¿What...?’

‘Anima Impii. I swiped some during Missa. I thought it’d be cool to light them up from this bridge. Try to bring that down.’

He pointed out the old Angelus that patrolled over our pier.

‘Let me.’ I grabbed one.

‘The Domini are going to get so pissed off.’

‘I thought you loved the NTC, fucker.’

‘¿This?’ He pointed at the NTC logo on his jacket. ‘This is just a symbol. I do whatever I want with it. Like, wiping my arse with it, ¿get what I mean?’

Alcalá laughed.

I didn't know how to react. Sceilig was there, holding the Anima Impii y suddenly my old hoodie with patches of rotten Sunnaluz felt itchy.

'Are we going to light these or not?' Sceilig asked.

I grabbed them from his hands without looking at him.

¿What?

¿What happens next? I don't know. I don't think I remember. I don't even know now why I was telling you this... I just... Sí. I don't know. Sí, sí, I know this is not relevant. I'll get back to the point. </record>

<record> **DEEL 12** *The jodido miracle of the crippled: get up y walk! (I wish...)*

Fog season started two weeks earlier than usual. I was heading home one day y everything was covered by a cold, thick layer, the tone of Vitamilk. You felt like you were walking under the sea, breathing salt y waves. I heard that clicking noise orcas do when they're hunting. I moved towards the middle of the Cabra bridge, pero I may have got closer to the water. I couldn't see a jodida blue whale right in front of me.

'Kerry.'

A voiced filtered through the fog.

'Kerry.'

A shadow appeared wearing a massive hatraguas with a front torch. I recognised Íscar's voice.

'Kerry.'

'Switch that fucking light off,' I said. All that flashing right in my face was electrocuting my brain.

'Tienes que ir a por tu hermana.'

¿What's wrong with my sis?'

'Alcalá's down El Mercado de San Miguel. Here.' Íscar passed me a tube of Sunnaluz y I rubbed a bit on my goggles so I could see what I was stepping on.

¿You want to know about El Mercado de San Miguel, Hermanas? It was the only Spanish market left, y you could find it inside the old submarine yard. You had to go

down a rickety ladder in Grangegorman Bridge. The plastic-made industrial unit reeked of piss, Rioja y the ghost stench of submarine fuel. Yes, it was a black market, like, everyone could go down there y sell or buy anything.

Alcalá, I thought, ¿what the fuck have you done?

Oxygen was not abundant in El Mercado. Every time I went down, my lungs melted. Groups of people gathered there with trolleys of random stuff, calling out the best offers of the day.

‘¡Bonito y barato! ¡Bonito y barato!’

A toddler with a respiradero played inside a box full of colourful hooks.

An old man, without legs, sitting in a wheelchair, picked a videodisc from a big pile. Beside him, a young girl (¿his daughter? ¿whore?) was selling them. If you hacked a deskreen, you could watch these instead of *Life of the Saints y Noah's Ark*.

Two thin sisters sold synthetic SugarHosts. They were so sweet you almost couldn't taste the plastic y they gave you a good boost anyways.

A woman smelling of fried skelpers (joder, I don't get how people can eat those monsters) tried to sell me a bastardised version of a Sunnaluz can. Probably skelpers' gelatine.

¿Who could I ask about my sister?

There was a man who had put a tablecloth on his stand (¡a tablecloth!) to display his V-D tablets. He spat on a junkie who approached him crying for a shot, y threatened him with a half-broken harpoon.

‘Vete a la mierda, yonki.’

My eyes went to a heap of arms y tools that three kids were guarding on a corner. The weapons were quite rusty pero there was a harpoon gun that looked pretty cool. They had gotten them by diving down into the mud, where their original owners had lost them. Sí, one of the kids had a greenish rash all over his face. Wasp-seaweed.

‘¿Have you seen my sister? Va en silla de ruedas, es morena...’

The girl pointed out a stand on the other side. Paperbooks. Of course.

I found Alcalá on the floor, checking out her queridos paperbooks. In that, she was like Father. I never understood what they saw in those unreadable things. Plus, ¿is

there anything more useless in the rain? Alcalá's little legs lay on the ground, two sleeping animals. Pero her face, joder, I swear she was fucking smiling.

‘No me jodas... ¿where is your wheelchair?’ I asked.

‘I like it. It has cool illustrations.’ She looked at me, holding one of the paperbooks.

‘You’ve sold the wheelchair, ¿right?’

‘Y this one is called The Bull’s Betrothed, and it’s about a Spanish sculptor Before the Flood that...’

‘You sold your wheelchair because you don’t fucking need it anymore, ¿right?’

‘Hey, cool down. They gave me all this money.’ She showed me a bunch of notes.

‘You’re probably going to spend all that, y more, to get it back, cause, ¿how the hell am I going to take you home? ¿How the hell are you moving from now on?’

‘Shut up y relax.’ She threw the paperbook away. ‘We need the jodido money y we’re all making sacrifices except you, shit sack. Now get me up y take me out. I’ll get Father to buy me another wheelchair soon.’

Mamá got really mad when I came in carrying Alcalá on my back. She went out for a long while, pero then she returned. We had warm SugarHosts for dinner y lots of fresh Sunnaluz to use in the morning. </record>

<record> **DEEL 13.** *Father eats nun-tits y he doesn’t even share*

Next day, me y Mamá went to see Father at his office in the NTC. Mamá was wearing her cleaning uniform. The blue plastic apron reeked of moss. Her face was a wizened mask. Y that was not only the effect of the fluorescent ceiling lights. She was getting old, Hermanas.

The corridors were empty. School time was over. The carpets were full of words, Book of Kells verses, that glowed whenever you stepped on them, so the Domini could meditate while exercising their earthly bodies.

Father often made me walk all over the NTC, reading, every jodido day after the classes. He was obsessed with me passing the final exams this year. He couldn't quite accept I was still in ninth grade when I should have been in eleventh. He needed me to complete twelfth grade to get the Irish Card. As if I cared.

Father's office was more like a mouldy cupboard. It barely fit the two china martyr virgins hanging from the lamp y a digiboard full of hand-written words. He had once been a Literature Master, but after Mamá had been demoted to the repairs department. He *was* the department. He took in reports of shit being faulty and then arranged for stuff to be fixed. All day long. But don't worry, cause to combat his frustration he had his sugar addiction. That's how we found him, looking at his deskreen, chewing caramelised nun-tits. He raised his eyes too slowly. He hated it when I entered without knocking first. Pero cuando he discovered Mamá behind me, oh Hermanas, ¡that was a face! I bet the nun-tits turned into gasoline in his mouth.

‘¿What are you doing here?’ He switched his deskreen off.

‘My job,’ Mamá said.

Father settled into his chair y placed five nun-tits on the deskreen in a perfect row.

‘It's the third day I come to work y they send me home because of this.’ Mamá raised her hands, still covered in black bandages. ‘I can work alright, I'm not slow or anything.’

‘Well...You've to deal with that.’ Father smashed the nun-tits with his thumb. ‘See, we can't be responsible if you end up losing your fingers.’

‘¿What? I need to work...’

‘You got what you deserved. I can't ask them to treat you in a special way.’ Father sucked his sugary thumb.

‘I know. But I can't lose my job, we need the money.’

‘¿Do my children need anything?’ Father kneaded the smashed nun-tits together using a pen. ‘My children, not that fat girl.’

‘Don't talk about Ree like that,’ I said.

‘It's ok, Kerry, just shut up,’ Mamá cut me off.

Father shook his head while he ate that disgusting amorphous thing that wasn't a nun-tit anymore.

'Look, I'll provide for *my* children as I've always done. I'm having a new wheelchair sent to Alcalá. And they can come here and live with me. That's probably the best thing to do, given your current situation.' He was catching caramel bits with his nails.

'I'd rather die.' I crossed my arms.

'I'm not asking you to take them away. Y you took Alcalá to that awful place where she almost drowned,' Mamá replied. 'I'm just asking for my job. I thought compassion was what Jesus...'

'Don't pronounce His name with your impure lips,' Father interrupted. 'Compassion is tolerating the presence of a whore in such a sacred place. And I'm not even telling them about your bullfighting. Don't ask for too much, woman.'

Mamá walked towards the door.

'Don't call my mother a whore.'

Blood was burning under my cheeks. I was always waiting for a chance to get Father. I took a step towards him.

'Kerry...' Mamá's voice sounded tired.

'You're disgusting...' I started, looking at him.

'Stop that, Kerry,' Mamá said from the door.

'I can't fucking stand you...' I continued.

Father raised his hand.

'Don't even try to touch me, viejo.'

We were the same height. His hands were still huge like metal planks, pero my arms were full of scars. He was trembling. I wanted him to hit me so I could hit him back. I wanted to hit him back more than anything in this world.

KNOCK, KNOCK.

'Come on in,' Father said.

The door opened y a woman entered.

'Sister Ciarana, ¿what can I do for you?' Father gestured us towards the door.

'Oh, nothing urgent,' she said.

She was the nun who had saved Alcalá. Her habit was now clean y sparkling with Sunnaluz y she held something wrapped in a purple towel.

‘I’ll come back later,’ she told Father.

She came out with us. Mamá stared at her as if she was watching Jesus Christ walking on Earth.

‘I heard everything,’ Sister Ciarana said. Pero she was not pitying us. She seemed disgusted. She put a hand on Mamá’s shoulder, y I’d like to say she looked friendly, or kind, pero it was more like a mantis grabbing its prey. ‘I can help you. Tomorrow night, at El Mercado. Bring everyone.’ </record>

<record> **DEEL 14.** *A very special kind of sun will shine on Neo Dublin soon*

When we arrived at El Mercado de San Miguel, everyone else was already waiting: Father, Íscar y Sceilig.

At night El Mercado turned wild. There were still some stands, pero these sold the freakiest shit, such as the mummified hands of obscure saints y other body parts that were supposed to keep evil away. People drank SugarCans y danced to ancient songs in hacked projectors, like *La Vida Loca*, mientras others opened their wet ponchos y offered their soggy bodies to the halo of the UVA lampposts.

I know this is weird, Hermanas, pero Sister Ciarana didn’t look strange at all sitting in a corner, on an empty box, drinking SugarCan, passing the beads of her rosary with her free hand. Her black tunic blended with the darkness. I don’t think anyone had seen a nun in El Mercado before. I mean, normal nuns would have left their habits at home before coming.

‘Welcome, Hermanas, Hermanos,’ she said.

It was then I realised that Sister Ciarana, Father, Ree y Sceilig were the only Irish in a multitude of hundreds.

A little girl was throwing up in a corner (y regretting having drunk so many SugarCans, I bet). Ree looked at the other side.

‘I won’t sit on the floor,’ she said.

For once, she was right. The place was covered in mierda, fishbones, piss y dried, sticky cum (sí, there was some fucking going on somewhere, possibly in the places the UVA lampposts didn't reach). Everyone dragged boxes y buckets close to Sister Ciarana's seat. Sceilig helped Alcalá so she could place her wheelchair next to the nun.

‘¿That alright, señorita?’ Sceilig asked.

‘Sí, sí, ponme ahí. There Gracias,’ my sis said.

Alcalá hadn't taken her eyes off Sister Ciarana. She wanted to stay close to the nun. That's why she was being all nice to Sceilig, like.

Father brought two broken plastic chairs so we could sit together. He offered me a SugarCan y opened another one for himself. He wanted to stay far away from Mamá. I slurped the sugary liquid. There was a man selling them going around, shouting prices whilst a brain-cripple followed him, carrying a bunch of cans. It would have been so easy to steal a couple, pero I bet Father paid double for them just to be pious.

‘She's Deus' messenger,’ Father whispered to me. Talking about Sister Ciarana, of course.

‘¿Another Maria Inoculata?’ I laughed.

‘Your mother is a bad influence,’ Father said. ‘Be blasphemous and you'll go to Hell, just like her.’

Pero, Hermanas, don't get this wrong. I had faith in Deus. It was because of faith that we all gathered in El Mercado that precise night. We all had witnessed Sister Ciarana's miracle: she had revived Alcalá y given her the gift of breathing Neo Dublin's noxious air. The nun's presence had been haunting us, just as blood haunts white sharks y makes them chase the prey they took that delicious bite from.

‘It's the paperback. She has the paperback that explains everything,’ Father said, y then started biting his nails. I bet he was fighting the need to jump on another SugarCan. I had seen so many empty SugarCans in his apartment before, hidden in drawers, cupboards y inside the electric fireplace.

Everyone went silent.

Sister Ciarana finished drinking her SugarCan, burped behind her hand y looked at us.

‘Hermanas, Hermanos. What I say must be said in our ancient language, Spanish. Because this is the language of Iberia and Iberia is where we all come from.’

Y she started talking in perfect Spanish (no joke):

‘Neo Dublín está podrido.’

Silence.

I started shivering as I realised why she could speak the two languages. She was a half-bred. Just like me.

‘Neo Dublín está podrido en barro y herrumbre, como el Infernum.’

Neo Dublin sucks, she said.

Silence.

I was all surprised to hear her speaking like that. After all, Spanish was banned, ¿no?

‘Solo hay una manera de destruir este pecado: el sol. Poderoso y terrible, como Deus.’

The city is full of shit y we need the sun.

‘Si no hay sol, Deus nos dará el poder para crear uno. Un sol poderoso y terrible.’

I was getting a bit confused, because she was talking about the sun, y how Deus would give us the power to create one, pero at the same time it seemed she was saying something completely different.

‘The sun...’ Ree whispered, pulling at the cross-necklace-ID around her neck.

‘Llevaremos nuestro sol al corazón del New Trinity College, y una vez allí, su ardor consumirá el edificio maldito en un suspiro. Esa es la voluntad de Deus.’

We’ll take our sun to the NTC y then it will make the building disappear because Deus wants that, so...

I was getting more y more confused.

‘Y el sol arderá, el sol que...’

Then I understood.

‘It’s not a sun, for fuck’s sake. ¡She wants us to put a jodida bomb in the NTC!’ </record>

<record> **DEEL 15** . *Y finally, I get something. I get a story to tell*

We were all, whoooo, like, ¿what?

‘Our saviour is not Jesus, but Saint Ciarán,’ Sister Ciarana continued, this time in Irish, ‘and he came from the peninsula that is now under the waters, and he spoke Spanish. The Domini didn’t conquer the Spanish, because the Domini are Spanish too. We all came from here, millennia Before The Flood.’

‘¿What...? That can’t...’

‘She’s telling the truth.’ Father stood up. His eyes were bright with tears. He had been waiting for that moment to make the revelation. ‘She showed me the paperbook, weeks ago, when she first came from the Vatican Boat. The Book of Cow.’

‘The Book of Cow...’ Íscar gasped.

‘We have enslaved our own race for too long now,’ Sister Ciarana continued. ‘Do you think that was what Deus wanted? Deus is angry at us. That is why the waters are raising, every day. Neo Dublin will soon be gone, and our sins will finally be punished. The New Trinity College is a monster, built on lies and suffering. A monument to human greed and lust for power. We must destroy it.’

‘She’s right. It’s all in The Book of Cow,’ Father spoke over her. ‘And as a Literature Master,’ tears started running down his cheeks, ‘I can verify she has the *real* document. And it explains the rains, the flooding, why we are here. Everything. The Pope has been hiding the truth for too long. Poisoning us with Vitamilk, to keep the population in manageable numbers, and controlling us by means of V-D. And now that the water levels are raising again he’s leaving us here to sink, with no food, nothing that can save us. There are all lies.’ He stamped on the floor. ‘They. Are. All. Lies.’

Silence.

‘¿There’s no more Vitamilk?’ Ree cried.

‘No, I’m telling you, the Pope is gone, with his Vatican Boat, y his cows, y the Vitamilk. Gone to look for other floating cities because Neo Dublin is already dead,’ Father replied.

‘But we’re hungry...’ Íscar complained.

‘The Pope can’t leave us now. We’re hungry,’ Ree repeated. ‘We’re starving!’

‘I know,’ Sister Ciarana said.

Y then she performed the second miracle.

She took something from under her habit.

A piece of meat.

Now, ¿can I just stop here for a moment? I’m feeling dizzy... Sí, sí. I know you have all kind of fancy foods here... no, I don’t want rundvlees. I want more sinaasappelsap, yes. More. Bedankt. Thank you.

In Neo Dublín we just got the Vitamilk, which was this warm flavourless liquid. Or the SugarHosts for a good boost of energy. Nothing else. Well, y the fish, that tasted great in comparison, gummy y salty, pero we tried not to eat it, because we were afraid of the cancer y the Excommunications.

We had never seen real meat, not even smelled it. Never, like. Edible animals were long gone. The closest thing left was Dominus Domitius’ paper-like calf, or the Pope’s cows that nobody had really seen.

So that piece she was holding, it was a fucking miracle. ¿Do you get it? That was the only proof we needed to believe she was holy. That made it for us. Sí.

That meat had the most rabid red colour. It was drenched in blood. It was disgusting y mouth-watering. Like seeing pussy for the first time. The smell of it. I’d never forget it. I knew it was food. My stomach was screaming for it.

I had to swallow hard. My mouth was filled with saliva. The meat had lumps that looked soft, like they would dissolve in my mouth. Yellow strikes of oily fat. It smelled of warmth, fulfilment, life. My muscles tensed. My body was dying to throw itself at that precious food.

Sister Ciarana separated the meat from the white towel it was wrapped in. A dark substance dripped down.

Dizziness.

I fought the need to lick the meat juice directly from the floor.

Everyone, Irish y Spanish, looked the same under those UVA lampposts: grey faces y hollow cheeks. Mierda.

Sister Ciarana held the miracle of the meat a while longer y finally she gave it to Alcalá.

‘Corpus Christi,’ she said.

Alcalá’s fingers nursed the meat y she lowered her head to kiss it.

She passed it to Ree.

‘Sanguine Christi,’ the nun said.

Ree licked it. Y passed it to Sceilig.

‘Corpus Christi.’

Sceilig gave it to Father.

‘Sanguine Christi.’

‘Amen,’ Father cried, y he passed it to Íscar.

‘Sanguine Christi.’

Íscar passed it to Mamá.

‘Corpus Christi.’

Mamá gave it to me.

‘Sanguine Christi.’

I kneeled, like everyone else. Pero I was so hungry.

I bit it.

When I tasted the meat, my blood warmed after what seemed a thousand winters. It was better than the Sunnaluz. My stomach was finally warm. I felt drunk y full of energy. My eyes itched.

I was still chewing when Ree took the piece from my hands. She stuffed it in her mouth. Father struggled to take it from her.

Hands, blood, teeth.

Íscar started crying.

‘Deus... I knew... He’d never leave us... sinking...’

The meat was gone y we were all covered in red now.

Sister Ciarana stood up. She was a tall woman. She raised her arms y closed her eyes. It was funny pero I didn't laugh. I didn't want to. There was something in her voice, her eyes. She felt true. She was a half-breed. She spoke Spanish y English. She was going to end the hunger. She had to come from Deus.

'To hell with the NTC.' Íscar kneeled in front of the nun, his chin glittering red.

'We'll follow you.' Father kneeled in front of her too. 'Show us the way. Please, show us.'

Sister Ciarana opened her eyes pero instead of looking at Father, she walked among us y grabbed Mamá's bloody hands. Mierda, you should have seen Father's face, well, everyone was jealous as fuck.

'Your talents have been wasted for too long. Tú vas a hacer la bomba.'

Sí. She asked Mamá to create the bomb.

¿You know what, Hermanas? Mamá was the only one who didn't tremble. She was not afraid. She wasn't even angry. She just sighed. Deeply. She seemed relieved. She looked the nun in the eye. She nodded.

'You will translate the Book of Cow, so everyone knows about the wonders of Saint Ciarán,' the nun told Father. 'You are a Literature Master, you were born to do this. And when the time comes, you will let us in the NTC.'

He started sobbing.

Sister Ciarana went to Alcalá.

'I saved your life once. And now the flesh shall save you again. You will help your father with the translation so our most important paperbook doesn't perish in the floods.'

'I'll do anything for you,' my sis answered.

'You have always been treated as an outsider by the Domini. But here you are with your family,' Sister Ciarana spoke to Íscar. 'You will get us the materials to make the bomb.'

'To Hell with those fat bastards,' Íscar smiled.

'And you...'

Sister Ciarana approached Ree. She was the only one who avoided to look at the nun, scared to shit, like. 'I know about your father. I know the

Domini murdered him. They will be a reckoning, my child. You will carry the bomb, and place it inside their NTC.'

Ree nodded. Still pale.

¿Y me? ¿Y me? I mean, the nun had spoken to everyone, pero I was left. After all, she had also betrayed me.

Then, ¡praise Deus!, she looked at me. She hadn't forgotten our deal. She had saved my sis and now I was prepared to do anything for her. Y (pay attention to this) she said:

'And you'll press the detonator.'

(Grandiose silence.)

'So you've a story to tell afterwards.' </record>

<record> **DEEL 16** *Flamenco dancing fluorescent lobsters*

Let's move forward a bit here. I don't want to bore you.

Sister Ciarana taught us Deus in a way we'd never heard before. She didn't talk about suffering, sin or repenting. She kept us fed y asked us to make a bomb.

¿What? She gifted us the flesh, of course we became her followers. I swear that's how it happened. Without her y her miracles, we'd have died. Y we knew it.

Además, we had never felt it before, you know, the euphoria, the holiness. It was as if our bodies had been frozen for decades, poisoned by the rain, y now they functioned as they should for the very first time. If you ate too many SugarHosts, you started seeing weird things, like gigantic fluorescent lobsters dancing flamenco. Pero meat not only kept the hunger away, it also made us lucid.

Every day, we all gathered in Sister Ciarana's house to listen to her reading The Book of Cow y then we devoured the meat.

I was there for the second part, really.

It was all part of a ritual, a Meat Missa, ¿do you understand, Hermanas? Famine was killing everyone else in Neo Dublin. Parents even prostituted their kids to pay for SugarHosts. Y there we were, feeding on Sister Ciarana's mysteries.

We were the chosen ones.

Oh, glorious chunks of meat. Like the miracle of the five loaves y two fish, she always had enough for us all.

‘Corpus Christi.’

‘Amen.’

‘Sanguine Christi.’

‘Amen.’

We buried our hands in the redness. We brought the melting flesh to our mouths y licked it y let it dissolve under our tongues so it lasted longer.

One day (yeah, I just remembered this now) I slurped a bit of gummy fat y I heard a giggle.

Sceilig.

The red was in his lips, cheeks, forehead. It was revolting y sexy. I dipped my fingers in the blood y touched his nose. I wanted him. That was revolting, too.

‘Fuck off,’ he whispered, giggling. Grey drops of meat juice clung to his hair.

‘You two, be quiet,’ Father ordered. ‘Show some respect. This is Deus mystery. Eat it. Become His mystery.’

Sister Ciarana’s scapula always remained white. She tore the flesh with her long nails y ate it like that, in small pinches.

‘But...’ Ree swallowed. ‘The bomb... it... it will kill people... it will... destroy...’ Her eyes were two green glasses full of anguish.

It was difficult to think about death when our stomachs were so gloriously full.

Ree grabbed another piece of meat y gulped it down.

‘Deus, this is so good.’

She was ravenous, like everyone else.

Eating flesh had only one downside: you always wanted more. </record>

<record> **DEEL 17** *Ripped clouds, singing stars y dancing boats*

After each Meat Missa, we always walked around Neo Dublin, all together.

The wind was wild y the rain felt electrifying. My body was full of savage energy. The bridges clinked. Over us, purple clouds raced across the sky, moving faster, way faster than us.

CLINK.

CLINK.

The stars were singing. There were stars, there, y there!

‘¿Can you see them?’ I grabbed Sceilig’s arm.

Once every one hundred years or so, the clouds moved so fast that one ripped, y you could catch a glimpse of the real sky above. Y stars. Y planets. Worlds y worlds beyond ours.

The NTC’s clock was shining, a full moon, saying goodbye. The waters sparkled y smelled of salt y deep mud.

Orcas whistled in the distance.

The barcos attached to the rusty piers danced. Like they could also hear the stars singing.

We all laughed. We were full y I felt damn good.

The crucifix farms waved at us in the distance, a collection of white skeletons. Many of the windmills didn’t work any more. School had stopped. The inquisitors didn’t arrest people anymore. Power failed all the time those days. ¿Who cared? The windmills deserved a rest. I felt their pain. Their weariness. I felt so many things since I had tasted the flesh.

Far beyond the waters, a shadow moved. ¿A blue whale? ¿The Vatican Boat?

I drank the rain. It was alright.

We were all connected.

The huge tower in the NTC, the clinking bridges, the dancing barcos, the millions of fish making the waters alive, the nourishing rain, the singing stars. I looked at my life from the outside y it was a musical score, every note had its place y the tune was perfect, like.

I grabbed more hands y more hands grabbed me. Flesh. It was better than being drunk. It was better than being loved. </record>

<record> **DEEL 18.** *Mamá dreams of her own Spanish Rover*

I helped Mamá set some of the small explosives. We were doing a trial before detonating the real bomb. Alcalá spent her time with Father, they were working on a translation of The Book of Cow, porque it was all in Spanish. I preferred doing handwork. Sí, I saw Mamá putting The Bomb together, pero that happened way later. ¿Was it big? ¿The Bomb? No, not really. Just a silver suitcase with guts made of cables y buzzing tiny things. No, I have no idea how it worked.

At this point, Mamá's hair was all silver ¿you know? Pero she looked younger than ever. Glowing, just like St Lucía carrying her own eyes in a tray y still ecstatic. She was wearing a sleeveless top y I could see her tattooed arms, showing how many corridas she had survived so far. Many of them carved into her skin way before I was born. She handed me the deskreen.

'My thesis,' she said. 'I submitted it to NTC Intellectual Property Office sixteen years ago. MarTren.'

'¿MarTren? ¿A sea train?'

'Sí, a train that goes over the water. The fastest vehicle on Earth. To see if it was possible to contact other floating cities, if any of them had survived.' Mamá grabbed the deskreen y started passing the pages. 'Everything is in there, the numbers, the plans, the engine...'

'¿What happened?'

'Those assholes... They sent me home. They laughed at me. They didn't even look at it. They just said, woman go back home y raise your family. I was seven months pregnant with you. That didn't help.'

She gave me the deskreen back. I looked at the mathematical formulas y madly detailed drawings.

'I was thinking about making something similar. More like a boat,' she said.

'¿A boat?'

‘Not very big, so we can hide it. Pero a boat strong enough to resist the explosion, to take some of us away from this poisoned place.’

‘¿Where?’

‘Anywhere.’

I don’t know why, pero The Irish Rover came to my mind. You know, that annoying song Íscar loved. It was about people travelling on a boat (pero it sank in the end).

‘¿Who’ll be on this boat? ¿Sister Ciarana? ¿Us?’

Mamá grabbed my hands.

‘Us. Sister Ciarana knows that some have to survive. There’s still work to be done to cure the rains. Everything can be fixed. Everything but death,’ she told me.

I imagined the MarTren, a silver eel rushing through the black sea.

‘Give me the thesis back. Let’s work on the jodida bomb now,’ Mamá said. ‘Let’s see if the guys from the NTC like it better.’

Sí, I know. The boat we arrived in was the one Mamá designed y built. Impressive. You liked it, ¿uh? You liked it sooo much you kept it. Fuck no, I don’t remember how she designed it. I told you, I’m the dumbest in my family. Y now everything is gone. No. It can’t be fixed. </record>

<record> **DEEL 19.** *Poisonous mud y warm SugarHosts*

Sí, we hung out sometimes. I mean myself, Ree y Sceilig. In the abandoned Windmill Farm, the one that didn’t work anymore by then. We kept coming back. It’s funny, sí. Da had been killed there pero there we were, us, drinking SugarCans y Rioja. The dizziness felt good.

‘The NTC is going to Hell,’ I said. ‘That fucking, fucking, place.’

‘Yes, but...’ Ree said. ‘The bomb... will destroy everyt—’

‘Who the fuck cares?’ I passed the Rioja back to her, pero she didn’t take it.

‘¿What’s wrong, you don’t like it?’ I asked.

‘It’s too sour.’

She looked at the other side y burped.

‘¿Is it because it’s Spanish or what?’

‘¿What? No, ¿you crazy?’

‘Say that again, gilipollas.’ I pushed her away. ‘Sister Ciarana is Spanish too, like us.’

‘She’s Irish,’ Ree replied, pushing me back. ‘She speaks Spanish, yes, but she doesn’t look Spanish...’

I smashed my SugarCan against the floor until it spat all its juices. The small figurines of Jesus Christ on the windmills didn’t want to witness what was about to happen.

‘Kerry, chill...’ Ree said.

I got the SugarCan back. It was empty. I couldn’t drink it. Pero I could throw it at Ree. Now, Hermanas, I didn’t want to hurt Ree. I wanted to hurt so many people, pero not Ree. Not really.

I threw the SugarCan at her.

‘What the fuck?’

I grabbed the Rioja bottle.

‘Kerry...’ Ree screamed, y she got on me y we struggled until the bottle slid off my hands y exploded y the booze poured down the floor, like blood.

‘Fuck you, vaca de mierda. Y fuck all you Irish,’ I shouted.

Ree ran away. She didn’t want to try my jodido Rioja because it was Spanish, ¿no? Now she’d try jodido mud. I grabbed a handful of the asqueroso stuff I wanted to smash on her mouth.

Someone grabbed me from behind.

‘Stop... Stop...’ Sceilig said.

‘Vaca, gilipollas de mierda,’ I said, kicking Sceilig’s ribs. I threw another SugarCan at Ree.

I hit her shoulder.

Sceilig grabbed my arm.

‘Stop.’

‘Fucking Irish...’ I shouted at her.

I kept throwing things until she was gone. Scrabbling in the mud like a worm.

‘¡Fuck the NTC!’ I said. ‘¡Fuck Neo Dublin!’

‘¡Fuck it! ¡Fuck it!’ Sceilig echoed.

It was then that Sceilig stumbled on me, or so I thought, y suddenly my mouth was on his mouth y it was wet y sticky pero its breath smelt of warm SugarHosts, sweet, warm SugarHosts.

I pushed him away.

‘Coño, quita...’

I was afraid.

He tried to kiss my mouth again.

‘¿What the fuck?’ I said.

I gave him a smack across the face.

His arms were all over around me y he kissed my lips.

He was hard too. I felt his cock on my stomach, curling inside his trousers.

Hermanas, I know you don’t see the problem here, pero the Domini would have said that El Diablo got me there, right there, in that jodido moment when I pulled Sceilig’s hair y bit his lips.

They tasted so fucking good, though. </record>

<record> **DEEL 20.** *Pearls y dangerous constellations*

Sceilig took me to a party in a submarine under Dolphin’s Barn. The Angelus or the Inquisitors couldn’t spot us there porque the submarine changed locations constantly, like a whale shark lurking under the mud.

It was crowded y damn hot. Everyone was semi naked. I had stepped in the Infernum’s hall, that dangerous place full of the temptations Domini had warned us about. Pero all the Domini had told us were lies, dirty, ugly lies. Neo-Dublin was sinking. Y here there were people getting drunk y kissing each other. The air there was SugarCan-sweet, not like that shit we breathed each day in North Liffey. People were dissolving V-D tablets, ready to inject them into their bloodstream. ¿Were they Irish? ¿Spanish? I couldn’t tell. They were of all ages y colours. The music mixed them all.

Sceilig got my hand y messed with his blond hair until it was all here y there. He smiled, winked an eye, y moved following the sound of the music.

A woman was singing in the background.

I got a V-D shot.

‘Ven aquí, Kerry,’ Sceilig said. ‘Vamos.’

I refused to move. The lights changed from pink to green to blue to yellow. I wondered where they got all the power to make them work. Sceilig’s white shirt revealed his neck y part of his collarbone. I wanted to lick it with my tongue. I took his hands y he wrapped his arms around my neck. He stood on tip-toes to look me in the eye. The curve of his neck was delicious. He was wearing a pearl necklace under the white shirt. The lights created mini-constellations in each of the beads. He rubbed his hips against mine.

‘It’s ok,’ he said. ‘Nobody knows anyone here.’

‘Mmmm...’

He wasn’t right, though. In this ocean of people, I kept recognising faces: Dominus Domitius, completely naked, riding his scooter y breastfeeding his calf, like, whilst a young girl opened her dress y tried to put her boob on Domitius’ mouth.

There were other people from North Liffey right next to them. I think I saw Íscar with another man. Kissing.

The Matadores were there too, the top part of their overalls tied around the hips. Mamá was with them, drinking y laughing, her arm extended whilst another woman tattooed it. The old guy without legs from El Mercado. The children with wasp-seaweed on their faces... ¿Was that man wearing a silver suit y a necklace of hooks Father? V-D was making me see things.

I drank the Rioja someone offered me.

I tasted Sceilig’s yellow hair, y his ears. I realised then he had the most perfect ears I’d ever seen, Hermanas. They were small y curled on the sides of his head. Perfect snail shells.

‘I like you...’ I heard him saying.

My tongue on his neck. On his chin. My fingers caressed his soft nape feeling the smooth cavity there. His pearls shone like stars. Sceilig was a galaxy. An exotic galaxy I should have never come across.

I dropped the glass of Rioja. I was an instrument, y he was playing me.

I kissed him.

‘I like you,’ he would say, every time he had to catch his breath. ‘I like you...’

</record>

<record> **DEEL 21** *Barcos howling in the ship graveyard*

I took Sceilig to see The Spanish Rover when it was almost finished. We had hid it in the Matadores’ headquarters, where they created their drone-bulls.

The Matadores had claimed for themselves the ship graveyard in Fairview, the only place in Neo Dublin where Domini didn’t bother to put angelus. That place was cursed, I’m telling you. The water looked like coagulated blood because of the rust y the spilled fuel. Y to that, you’ve got to add the fetid explosions (shark farts, we called them) y black bubbles popping all the fucking time. Barcos lay on top of each other, like whale carcasses. The rain had a metallic sound there, y when it was windy, the barcos screamed like mating seagulls. Sometimes you could even hear words, I swear. Those barcos wanted to get out. They had been made for fishing y travelling, the two things Domini hated the most.

I guided Sceilig to the Matadore’s headquarters, located inside a huge cruise ship with faded grey letters on its hull that read ‘Transmediterranea’. I keep wondering what that meant. I liked to think that barco had seen cool things, Europe Before The Flood, like. ¿Did you know that the Domini used to tell us that Europe didn’t exist anymore? Europe. We’d get hit in the mouth just for saying that word. They also told us we were the only floating city left. In the entire planet, like.

Inside the ship it was cold as fuck, pero the smell got bearable: synthetic oil y fried SugarHosts.

We passed by the pools that were the bullfighting rings y headed down to the workshops where they created the drones.

‘Spooky.’ Sceilig caressed a mess of wires y screws. Bulls always looked scary to me, even when they were switched off. Some Matadores gave them animal features: eyes y limbs y hooves y all. I hated bullfighting. Y not only because I hated seeing Mamá diving in the ring before the waters turned red with her blood. I always felt disgusted when bulls got destroyed. Those machines moved like they were alive... they had to suffer too.

‘Come.’

I opened the bunk's door with Mamá's code. Inside, The Spanish Rover looked like an old bulky boat, but I knew its guts (the engine) was where Mamá was focusing on.

‘¿You guys did this?’

‘Yeah. It's going to take us far,’ I promised Sceilig.

The smell of new paint y Sunnaluz made me dizzy. Íscar was getting us tons of Sunnaluz those days, y we used it all on the barco.

‘It's so small,’ Sceilig said, looking over the railing y into the darkness.

‘That's so it can jump the waves.’

I sniffed Sceilig's nape. We started kissing. I grabbed his cock. It was stuck to his pelvis, pointing at his belly button. I kneeled down y opened his trousers to take it out. It tasted slightly sour y spicy. He pulled my hair y pushed his hips forwards. I wanted to keep sucking his cock pero he pushed me away. Rage hit me pero when I turned back I saw Mamá was there, at the door, with a mess of green y red wires in her hands.

Sceilig had already zipped up his trousers pero I stayed on my knees. I wanted to shout at her, pero my voice was lost.

She smirked.

‘No pasa nada,’ she told me. Then she was gone. The sound of a nailing gun started coming from the barco's bridge.

No pasa nada.

She was not calling the Inquisitors. She was not telling Father. Nobody had to know we were going to the Infernum. I mean, she was going to the Infernum, too,

after all that bullfighting. Jesus. The whole city was going to the Infernum in less than a month. ¿Why worry? </record>

<record> **DEEL 22.** *Flowered dresses y sugar martyrs mark the end of a dream*

Palm Sunday came, foreshadowing Jesus Christ's murder y marking the beginning of Easter. The Bomb would explode on the Resurrection Sunday, a week later.

We went to Phoenix Lake that Palm Sunday to test Mamá's new barco after Missa. Sí, our dear Spanish Rover. It looked quite clapped-out y old from the outside, made from loose bits and pieces that Mamá had been storing for years. Pero the engine was tight y sweet y the hull, covered with rusted planks, harder than shellfish's teeth.

That afternoon, the rain was only a caress. The air smelled of blue mushrooms, mussels y gasoline. The sky was white for the first time in months.

Primero we organised a mud race at Phoenix Lake (porque the mud there was less toxic). The one that reached the obelisk in the middle first would be the winner. I carried Alcalá on my back y we were an awesome team y we won. Then we laughed at the others, staying next to the obelisk, sinking in the mud slowly, slowly, like when you fall asleep.

Íscar shouted at us, in who knows what kind of gibberish, when we threw mud at him. He lay on a mat on the deck of the boat, his hatraguas off, to let the light rain fall on his skin. He'd said some shit about rain being good for the skin. ¿What? Everyone knew rain was radioactive y made things mutate. Well. Íscar's brain was probably affected beyond hope at that point.

Covered in mud-freckles, Mamá sat next to Íscar. Ree came to show Mamá her new dress. Ree wasn't wearing her poncho either (they were all going to develop tumours after that day, I was pretty sure about that). The dress had a flowery pattern y it was short so I could see Ree's white legs. Y her knees. Her knees were like soft bundles of dough. I wished I could bite them.

‘¿Let's do another race! ¿Come on!’

Ree's copper hair was covered in mud pero her eyes were super bright, like new-born moss.

‘¡Let's go!’

I shook my head. My arms were still hurting from the last race, y every time I coughed, mud came out of my nose.

‘¿Sceilig?’ She asked.

‘Nah, puppy,’ he said. He always called her that.

Ree laughed y then took Alcalá on her back y ran down back to the mud with her. Alcalá laughed too, so hard that it seemed she was going crazy. Going up y down on Ree's back, screaming.

‘Careful there...’ Father warned them, from under a gigantic green hatraguas. He was licking a sugar martyr on a stick.

When nobody was looking, I grazed Sceilig's hand, so I did. It was just a second.

Sí, this was the moment. I was happy then. We all were, I think. We were so used to nightmares pero that day at Phoenix Lake was our sweet dream.

Until Siser Ciarana summoned us, y we were all at the main quarters of The Spanish Rover. The nun was wearing dark goggles, she said light days hurt her eyes.

She related the old stories from The Book of Cow one more time, from when cattle grazed free, y Saint Ciaráin brought light with him, y then he came back to Spain, where the sun shone every day, y people were covered in golden dust y rain was a rarity. ¡Imagine...!

Pero that time she didn't celebrate any Meat Missa. Instead, the nun's face darkened, as though covered by thick blue clouds, y she said:

‘En verdad, en verdad os digo, que uno de vosotros me hará traición.’

Someone among us will betray us. </record>

<record> **DEEL 23.** *Welcome to Centipede City*

Sí, those last weeks were all about putting the explosives in place. Me, Ree y Sceilig did that. No, for the last time, I don't know how the explosives were made or how they worked. You would have to ask Mamá, pero...

<...>

We started with the NTC foundation. That's how we blew up the whole thing. It was pretty easy, porque the NTC had been already sinking little by little, y the classrooms on the lower floors were already infested with living-things. There were all sorts of hazard signs.

DO NOT CROSS.

ENTRANCE FORBIDDEN.

DANGER.

Domini had evacuated these places y thrown arsenic to the waters, trying to get rid of the plagues. Pero they'd already forgotten about them.

We slipped through corridors y staircases always going down, down, down, until the Domini's chants were replaced by the waves smashing against the walls. It stank of wasp-seaweed. Cold water licked our ankles y reached our knees in some places. We placed the explosives in all the places Mamá had marked on the map. Here y there, here y there.

Now, Mamá had done beautiful work with these explosives. They were were all in waterproof capsules y could be activated remotely. Ah, y they were noiseless, just like the worst farts. Y for the last time, for real, that's all I know about them.

We saw a classroom close by. It didn't reek too much.

'Kerry, ¿what do you think lives in there?' Sceilig asked.

'Centipedes, ¿what else?' I said.

Sceilig laughed.

‘Let’s get this done,’ Ree insisted. ‘Come on, we’ve to go back...’

We opened the door in two, three kicks. The water inside felt viscous. I switched on the torch attached to my hatraguas.

‘For fuck’s sake’ I heard Sceilig scream. ‘¿Have you seen that?’

SPLASH.

I moved just to see a long shadow diving down, through the water.

‘Here,’ Ree screamed.

The water was full of them.

‘It’s like centipede city,’ Sceilig said.

‘They’re venomous fuckers,’ I reminded him.

‘Wow, wow, wow, holy shit, look at that,’ He ran through the water. ‘Hey, bring the light, bring it.’

I followed him slowly, Hermanas. I was afraid. What a pussy. Pero centipedes had bit me twice in my life, see. ¿Do you have centipedes here? Then you don’t know what I’m talking about...

Finally, I got to see what Sceilig was gesturing towards. A little maroon mountain growing on a rotten desk.

‘¿What the f-?’ Ree said.

‘It’s a centipede colony.’ Y then it occurred to me. ‘Give me the flame-thrower, Ree. Quick. Quick. Quick.’

‘Let’s go,’ Ree said.

I took the flame-thrower from her hands y pressed the trigger as hard as I could, Hermanas, y directed it at the mountain. The classroom turned white y then sparkles were everywhere, petards, like.

The centipedes started to squirm out from the colony’s base, their segmented bodies contorting in weird forms, their antennae moving frenetically trying to understand where the fire came from. Hundreds of them, small y big, started falling into the water. Half of their bodies were already charred. The colony melted like earwax, pero that didn’t stop the flames. Some big centipedes appeared. Hermanas, those were real monsters, y I swear I heard noise, like fainting screams. The smell was unbearable: rotten Vitamilk mixed with the carcass of a shark rotting in the mud y a

shit tank covered by purple mould. The mountain had disappeared y in its place there was a mix of mud, boiling water y centipedes' parts. I wanted to puke pero I didn't, because Sceilig y Ree were there, y Ree. I pretended to enjoy myself.

Y then there was a CRACK y the rotting desk gave up y the centipede mess sank into a hole. Dark salty waves started forming around it. We ran y ran up the stairs. Si.

¿Can I tell you something? Burning live centipedes didn't feel as good as burning things. </record>

<record> **DEEL 24.** *Crazy Dutch Gardens*

Sceilig wanted to show me something. He got out from bed y took a pocket-size projector y pressed some buttons y FLASH, there it was, a hologram came out, on the bare wall in front of us. I was not paying attention to that. I liked to study Sceilig's naked body. His narrow shoulders, his smooth hips, his fleshy thighs. The golden fur on his stomach.

'Hey, ¿isn't it pretty?'

¿What...?'

I sat on the bed eating SugarHosts. I wanted to be happy. To laugh.

'Look at this, Kerry. *The Garden of Earthly Delights.*'

He meant the hologram, which was a mess of colours y all things, like. I bent over to watch it closer.

It had three parts. The most colourful one was in the middle y showed a lot of folks fucking y playing around an artificial lake, or something. There were flowers y animals, y beasts. These guys looked all pretty dry, they couldn't possibly have known the rain, I thought. Lucky them.

¿Is this some religious shit?' I asked, because the first part looked something like the Garden of Eden.

'No, this was painted by a crazy Dutch. A very old one.'

'Dutch were crazy,' I agreed.

‘Well, if they live in a place like this,’ he pointed out the lake, ‘I wouldn’t blame them. I like it, though. Dutch, they know the sea, they’ve lived with it for ages and ages, and they’re all right. ¿Did you know they have many floating cities up there? They were the first ones in Europe to build them y look, they’re still having fun.’

‘¿What do you mean? The Dutch don’t exist anymore. All the floating cities are gone.’

Sceilig started at me.

‘Do you really believe all that shit the Domini told you? There’re many floating cities around. Venice, Porto, Berlin... But Amsterdam is the biggest of all, see. The Dutch built the best floating cities because they were never on land to start with. I heard they even have trees and all.’

‘¿Trees?’

He nodded.

‘And cows, red cows like this one,’ he pointed out a little animal in the central scene. It had evil eyes y reminded me of a skinny water-rat with horns.

‘¿How do you know?’

‘They traded real cow embryos with us. For the Vitamilk. We gave them Sunnaluz.’

‘But the Domini said...’ I didn’t quite believe Sceilig, I mean, I wanted to, pero it all sounded bullshit to me. The thing is, I was so chilled I just went with it. ‘¿Have you ever seen the Dutch?’

‘No, but their parcels arrived on the Vatican Boat all the time when I lived there. This came with one.’

I licked my fingers. They were sticky. I could also taste something more spicy, real. Sceilig’s cock.

‘See,’ he kept going, ‘Infernum is in the flames, ¿right?’ He showed me the last part of the picture. A city y its monsters burning in orange flames. ‘Not in the waters. Domini are making us afraid of this world. Of what this world really is’

‘I hate the water.’ I sucked one of Sceilig’s fingers. ‘Water is killing us.’

‘Sure, Neo Dublin is a wet dumpster. But Amsterdam, that should be all right, I’m telling you. I want to go up there.’

He came back to bed y I lay over him. Our legs locked.

‘¿To that lake? ¿Do they have these super big sized birds y all?’

‘Possibly. Y they... they don’t have religious shit, if you get what I mean. They’ve an atheist state. They’ve real freedom up there.’

‘¿Do you want to leave Neo Dublin?’ I felt sick. Too many SugarHosts. Pero I wanted to have Sceilig. I wanted him all. A life without him... ¿could that be a life at all?

‘Yeah, we’ll make it there, ¿right? In the boat, in The Spanish Rover your mum is building, after the...’

I covered his mouth with my mouth. I didn’t like him saying the word ‘bomb’ when we were alone. </record>

<record> **DEEL 25. BLING, BLING, BLING... CHACKS**

Good Friday. Jesus Christ’s ghostly funeral service.

When the day got darker, the Irish started their Holy Processions. They all flooded the bridges dressing in black cloaks y capirote hoods. ¿What? Sí, capirotos were pointy hoods with just two holes for the eyes.

I was working with Mamá at the Fairview graveyard pero I got sick of messing with wires so I got back home. I heard whales fighting. It was mating season. I took my poncho out as soon as I got in. There was another noise. BLING. ¿Water rats? I squeezed through the corridors inside the barco. It smell of dried oil y Alcalá’s paperbooks rotting.

BLING.

BLING.

BLING.

It came from Alcalá’s cabin. The door was half open.

Alcalá was lying on the floor. Ree was on top of her, copper hair falling on Alcalá’s face so I couldn’t see anything much apart from Ree’s little, tiny white nose.

Pink freckles. I smelled her: cheap synthetic cologne y sour Vitamilk sweat. Her enormous thighs were bent under her flowered dress, fat trembling like jelly. Ree's dress was open at the front. She had a phosphorescent yellow bra that could barely contain her massive sugar pudding boobs. Y they would probably taste as nice. Oh Hermanas. Y then Ree opened her bra y her boobs poured down Alcalá's face.

They were fucking each other.

Almost. I think.

Fuck.

Sí, I was angry. You know, in another life, I had imagined myself there. In another life, the sound of Ree's bra opening would have been just for me. I had wanted Ree for so long. I wanted to lick her, to swallow her like candy. Pero something was wrong with me. I could hear Father's voice saying once again:

'You've to turn El Diablo away from your soul, Kerry...'

Something was wrong with me.

Sceilig.

Ree.

They would never be mine... I hated Alcalá. Even her, being a cripple y all, had a chance with Ree. Pero not me. Something was wrong with me. Something was wrong with me.

</record>

<record> **DEEL 26.** *Our tearless Holy Mother*

I came out from the boat porque I couldn't breathe. I kept seeing my sister y Ree. It was playing in my mind, on a loop.

Putas, putas, putas.

The Holy Week Procession came down North Liffey.

People wore black y marched along, while beating the drums. They had been repeating the same tune for ever y ever, like drones. Just one thing made them human: the blood drenching the drum heads. Sí, they beat them that hard.

There was something weird in this Holy Week Procession, though. Instead of a cross, the capirotes at the front were carrying a glass reliquary embellished with golden chains y plastic flowers. There was a child lying inside, his hands tied up with a rosary y arranged in praying position. His skin was bluish. I wondered if the wax was old or if it was a *real* child. Kids had been dying all over North Liffey for months, pero now the same happened in the Irish houses.

Skelpers.

Scurvy.

Starvation.

The capirotes walked barefooted, y their feet were claws. Experiencing any part of Jesus Christ's suffering was a holy act. Some of them dragged shackles. Those were the ones who had done very bad things, Mamá used to say. Inquisitors. Excommunicators. All of them repenting through blood.

It was all about blood.

More glass reliquaries with children y then, guess who. The Steel Maria appeared between the mist y the rain. The drumming went mad. The Holy Mother was standing on a palanquin that had space for six to hold it, pero there were just two capirotes struggling to carry it on their shoulders. She was eyeless. Her metal sockets were empty. I don't think she could see our pain. It was all a big lie. Our Holy Mother was not crying for Jesus Christ or her deceased children. She was not crying for us, either. ¿Why would she care? She was made of steel. She had never been alive.

Ree y Alcalá.

I realised I had something in my hands. The iron bar we used as an oar to move the barco.

Ree y Alcalá.

I stepped into the Procession.

We were all starving again. No more Meat Missas, because there was a traitor among us.

I raised the bar.

Y the NTC was sinking.

I hit the Steel Maria as hard as I could.

A metallic wave swallowed the drumming. The palanquin fell in the mud.  
I hit the statue again, y again, y again until the metallic face started bending.  
Screams.

Cries.

‘Kerry....’

Some of the capirotes tried to grab me, pero they were all too weak, like made from paper.

The Steel Maria’s face was all bent. Monstrous.

‘Kerry... Kerry...’

It was Íscar. He was not wearing his hood. He was crying.

‘Kerry... don’t...’

¿What did the Steel Maria mean for him, for them all? It was just a fucking statue. Hands grabbed me back pero I kept hitting. The Steel María’s head fell off y one of her arms went flying.

I went for the glass reliquaries.

Fucking child martyrs. They were already in Heaven, while Neo Dublin turned into the Infernum. Domini had turned it into the Infernum.

Hermanas, as soon as I broke the first reliquary, the screams turned into wails. You should have seen the way the Capirotes fought me. Pero there were no Inquisitors close enough to stop me. They were all dead already, or too starved to fight.

Íscar held one of the reliquaries.

‘You... can’t...’ His eyes were about to pop out. He embraced the glass as if the child inside was alive.

‘Drop it,’ I told him.

‘You...’

‘Drop. It.’

He didn’t.

I beat the glass y it burst, y the pieces, daggers like, sank into Íscar’s face.

The child inside the reliquary.

I’ve been thinking since then. There was no blood, pero I heard the sound of real bones (such small bones) cracking.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. </record>

<record> **DEEL 27.** *The doctor y his stapler gun*

Father came when Mamá was curing Íscar's broken face. She had kicked everyone else out of the room pero made me stay y watch. Father brought along a young Dominus with ears as big as fins. He carried a little suitcase of medical equipment.

‘¿You did that?’ Father asked me.

I looked over my shoulder. The young Dominus had a stapler gun in his hand. It looked fancy.

‘Jesus Christ... ¿Why son, why...?’ Father put his hand over his mouth.

‘He...’ Mamá said.

‘It’s your fucking fault. You’ve got him here, living with scum and he’s turned into scum,’ Father said.

‘Don’t you...’ Mamá started.

‘You selfish woman...’

‘You wanted to take him away from me.’

‘Yes, I wanted to take him away because...’

‘We’ve to take Íscar to the NTC hospital,’ Mamá interrupted him. ‘Stop that,’ she said to the young Dominus, ‘¿do you know what you’re doing?’

‘He’s not Irish, we can’t...’ the young Dominus stuttered.

‘You go and pay your fucking money so they fucking take him into the fucking hospital,’ Mamá said to Father. ‘Or I’m taking your son to the Inquisitors.’

‘You spoiled him.’

I let the screams pour down on me, like rain in a purple storm.

‘¿Me? You spoiled him with that shit about the NTC and religion. He’s not one of them.’

‘Because you took him.’

‘I couldn’t leave him with you.’

‘You... you should have never had children,’ Father said.

‘¿Want to know why I took you, Kerry?’ Mamá grabbed my arm. ‘Your Father here was a V-D addict. He was so high, all the fucking time, he didn’t even know who he was. You were little, Kerry. Y you cried when he hit me, you cried so much, y he was so annoyed that he threw you down the stairs. He broke your arm. He almost killed you.’

I started to get the feeling that my right arm was heavier than the other. I had always thought that my right arm was shorter since birth. I told you, Hermanas, deformities were so common, y I was lucky compared to my sister. I couldn’t remember the time Mamá was talking about, though. I couldn’t remember anything from when we lived in the NTC. I wondered why Mamá was saying all this now. A part of me wished Mamá was lying. Pero Father was discomposed. Mamá was right. She was fucking right.

‘Kerry, listen...’ Father’s voice sounded weird. Dry.

‘¿Why are you so afraid?’ Now Mamá was tall y immense, y not scared of Father at all. ‘It’s the truth. ¿Is not that what obsesses you all, Domini? The truth. Sí, your son took it all from you. All from you.’

‘Shut up. Kerry can be saved. He can still be saved. Not like you. You’ll burn in the Infernum you whore, you’ll burn in there forever.’

‘¿Save Kerry? ¿You still want to save Kerry? ¿You know about him and Sceilig? ¿You know they fuck each other? ¿Is he going to be saved by your jodido Deus after that? He’s beyond any fucking salvation,’ Mamá shouted at him.

Joder.

My head buzzed.

Deus.

‘¿What?’ Father’s eyes filled up with jodidas real tears. He looked at me pero didn’t look at me. It seemed he was looking at a rotting corpse, floating on the mud, razor shells nesting in his sockets, nose y mouth. Something nauseating. Something wrong.

I wished I could tear Father’s face with my hands, so he couldn’t look at me like that ever again.

Instead, I came to Mamá.

I felt the shame burning in my chest for all the disgusting things Sceilig y I had done.

I slapped Mamá's face.

I needed to go to Sceilig before Father killed him. </record>

<record> **DEEL 28.** *Tungsten, hallowed be thy name*

The door trembled inside Sister Ciarana's house. She y Sceilig looked at me. The door trembled. Drumming. Thunders y lightning.

'Open the door, Kerry, open the door, open the fucking door,' Father roared outside.

I looked at Sceilig. ¿Would Father kill him? Father hated anything impure. He hated sex. He hated faggots. Me y Sceilig, that was way too much for him.

'Open the door now, open the fucking door or I'm going to burst the fucking door now, Kerry, Kerry right now, open the door.'

Sceilig came closer to me y reached my hand. His fingers, like an insect, stayed for a second y then flew away.

'¿What's going on?'

Sceilig looked so fucking scared.

'He won't touch you,' I told him.

'But...'

He looked at his mother.

Sister Ciarana was in a corner, in the dark, passing the beads on her rosary, humming, '*A O come here bring your gold encattle bring the sun the moon, and all the beautiful things you have created...*'

'Your father has to go. Please,' Sceilig said.

I nodded y went to the door.

'Go away,' I screamed. 'Mamá is a whore y you're an asshole y you're not touching Sceilig, so go away you fucker.'

'Kerry,' Father answered y I understood then that it had been way worse to reply because now there was some crazy hope in his voice. 'Kerry, please, please...'

One thrust.

Sister Ciarana screamed.

A second thrust.

The door fell down. Father was inside.

Sister Ciarana walked towards him.

‘Don’t you dare...’ She was telling him not to hurt us, pero he didn’t let her finish.

‘You fucking freak...’

He punched Sister Ciarana’s face so hard that her body bent y she almost fell. Blood ran down her nose.

‘No, you...’ Sceilig ran towards them y I thought he wanted to protect his mother.

Sister Ciarana grabbed a horned Virgin Mary figurine set on a glass table y hit Father in the head. It was so fast it seemed unreal. A joke.

CRACK.

She hit him again.

CRACK.

CRACK.

‘Stop stop, stop...’ Sceilig yelled.

Hermanas, ¿you see? Sceilig was not concerned about Father hurting Sister Ciarana, pero the other way around.

Sister Ciarana’s golden hair was all over the place, her veil around her neck.

‘Stop...’ Sceilig cried.

Sister Ciarana’s hands were red pero she didn’t falter. She raised the figurine one more time. Holy pure tungsten.

I forgot to breathe. </record>

<record> **DEEL 29.** *The horned Virgin Mary hosts our Last Dinner*

I don’t know if I want to continue. Yes, my father died. He died. He died, y I went mad, y Sister Ciarana tied me up to a chair y called everyone pero I don’t remember

any of that porque I was blind with rage. ¿Enough now? ¿You want more? ¿Still?  
 Fuck you. This is everything.

<...>

‘He was the one,’ Sister Ciarana told us. ‘He was the traitor.’

Mamá cried. I felt something in my chest. A fish-bone piercing my throat, like.

My face burned.

My arms burned.

My legs burned.

Being tied up to the chair burned like the Infernum. Like the sun.

‘Kerry...’ Mamá said.

I looked at the bundle of green clothes dirty with blood. The statue of the  
 horned Virgin Mary was among them. She had a contented expression on her tungsten  
 face.

Whore.

I didn’t want to look at what lay on the table.

If they’d tried to force me, I’d have hit them, bit them, anything. Pero I was  
 not going to look.

‘Kerry...’

Those clothes on the floor. Father’s clothes. Like a pile of rubbish.

‘Kerry...’

Mamá hugged me. Her body was warm y smelled of the sweet whale resin that  
 she used to clean the barco’s gears. After five or six years, I felt I was coming back  
 home. My goggles got misty. Oh, Deus, I stopped seeing. What a blessing...

<...>

Y so Sister Ciarana started telling another story:

‘Apart from being a nun, I am a cattle keeper. And a butcher, too.’

Sister Ciarana opened a reliquary that had been sitting on the table all that time. A lacquered box decorated with happy calves grazing on golden grass. Pero inside there were no old bones or pieces of fabric. Just Knives. Weird-shaped knives.

‘Sí, there were cows in the Vatican Boat,’ she continued. ‘Real cows. ¿Where did you think the Vitamilk came from?’

She started organising the knives on the table.

‘Well, technically they were not alive. They were... designed.’ She took a serrated knife y started cutting the dead limbs from him. From that body I knew so well.

The noise made me sick.

‘They sure breathed, but they didn’t look like cows anymore. They didn’t have eyes. ¿Why did they need eyes? Or legs. They didn’t have them, either. A waste of space. And no, no horns. Actually, they didn’t look much like cows. Like the cows in the deskreens, I mean. They were basically big lumps of hairy flesh with venous udders hanging on the side.’

I retched.

‘They told us they were our manna. And we all needed food. So I took care of them. I gave them pills whenever their udders had ulcers. I butchered their bodies to burn them when they stopped producing milk. But one night... I swear by Deus, I heard them crying.’

Alcalá was studying the table with wide, bright eyes.

‘¿What did you do?’ she asked.

‘I finished them. The cows. It turned out, they were alive. They were suffering. And then, I purged the other Sisters of Cow. To erase their sins.’

‘¿You killed them?’

‘The Pope would never allow that. What you did... you murdered...’ Ree was pulling her cross-necklace-ID so hard that she tore it.

‘¿The Pope?’ Sister Ciarana made a weird noise. Half a laugh y half a snort, like. ‘I ate the Pope.’

A lump of bloody flesh landed on Ree’s dish.

‘My sinful body purged them. That was my sacrifice. And your sacrifice, too. That’s what we’ve been doing. Purging everyone in Neo Dublin. Making them Holy. We all deserve to be Holy.’

Sister Ciarana buried her teeth in the bleeding flesh.

<...>

‘I’ll do it,’ I said.

‘We cannot trust you.’ Sister Ciarana cleaned her mouth with the back of her hand.

‘I’ll pull the trigger.’

It was so hard to move. My arms y legs were numb.

‘I’ll pull the fucking trigger.’

‘You’re the son of the traitor.’

‘You don’t get it.’ I swallowed. The tears y the snot blocked my throat. ‘To hell with humanity. To hell with them all. I’ll pull the fucking trigger.’

Y then, in my mind, we were again at the bridge, where Sister Ciarana had saved my sister y I had promised her I’d do whatever she wanted me to do. This was it. Y she knew it, too.

‘You’re right.’ She got a bloodied knife y cut the ropes. ‘Humankind is the monster.’ The white horns of her cornette were enormous. Black y white, she was a nun-cow. ‘The only way to turn humankind into something good is by eating it, transforming it into manure to heal the Earth.’

Her hatred poured over me like boiling water. Not her words or what she meant by them, pero her hatred. Hatred made my blood boil too. She hated people as much as I did.

I got off my chair y crawled to the table.

I buried my face in the meat from my father’s body. I embraced it. I nursed it with my body, as if it was a baby. It smelled of wet hooks. I licked the blood. The fibrous matter. The dull grey fat. The pain. </record>

<record> **DEEL 30** . *That forgotten body in the bottomless waters*

The day after, I woke up in the middle of the night. Alcalá was screaming, hitting the floor of the barco with her fists, her head. Screaming louder than the women y men on the public Excommunications.

It was so fucking cold out of bed, like swimming across the sea. Alcalá's mouth was full of saliva y when Mamá ran to calm her, Alcalá hit her. I took my sis into my arms. I didn't mind the blows. Her body was so cold. She had been like this since the last dinner. She had trouble breathing again. We still had her respiradero, pero there was no power to charge it. All the crucifix farms had stopped y turned dark by then.

Alcalá was so light. Her bones were so very fragile. I could crack them, if I wanted to. My sister. She didn't smell of anything. She used to smell of V-D pills, the ones you could put on Vitamilk to make it orange y fizzy. Father always gave her lots of those to chew.

I held her tight. She calmed down. She knew I wouldn't let anything bad happen to her.

I nursed her tiny body in my arms. I was not angry or annoyed at anything now, knowing that someone loved me, that someone needed me as she did. (She held one of my curls with her small fingers y squeezed it.)

Pero there it came, the fear. Fear of her cold body never recovering its warmth. Fear of Sister Ciarana. Fear of Sceilig. I saw him, he opened his mouth (the Sceilig in my mind). It was full of sharp teeth, piranha-like. </record>

<record> **DEEL 31** . *White dolphins shout at me: you're so lucky*

Resurrection Sunday. Everything around me was quiet. The UVA lampposts were dark.

The sea was furious.

I dragged my body towards Rory O'More bridge. The school uniform hid all the purple rope marks. My throat was still on fire. I spat out bitter blood. I had gulped down the flesh.

The human flesh.

She thought I was weak, ¿didn't she?

Pero I was going to pull the trigger.

Me.

(Ree was gone by the. We didn't know where.)

SPLASH.

A group of three white dolphins leapt out of the water. Following me, screaming. The Bomb's detonator was in my backpack. The card that gave access to all the corridors, Father's card, was tucked inside my shirt. I jumped into the water y swam to the NTC. </record>

<record> **DEEL 32.** *There is one amongst us who will betray us (y I know who this is)*

That ladder. It was that same place (sweat started going down my nape) where Dominus Domitius had punished me once. I was supposed to climb that ladder to get to the clock room, set the detonator y push it so The Bomb, hidden inside the NTC guts weeks ago, would make BOOM.

I talked to Deus then, Hermanas. For the very first time in my life, I put my hands together y I called for Deus up in the clouds, higher than the rain, closer to that sun we didn't see anymore. I told Him what I was about to do. Pero I was not praying. I was not asking. I was just mocking him. Porque all the Domini were floors below, on the main chapel, in the middle of the Resurrection Missa, celebrating that Deus was going to bring his celestial son back to life. Well, they would be the first ones to burst into flames.

Sister Ciarana promised me that The Bomb would purify their bodies. Hermanas, I just wished they would all burn. Sister Ciarana was right in just one thing: humankind was the monster. Y we had been eating it porque we were monsters too.

Pressing my eyes closed, I climbed the ladder. Flames came up my leg. I bit my tongue to deceive the pain. I trusted that the next step would be there. Y it was there. Y so was the next. Y the next.

I arrived. There was a little skylight y a repetitive noise, a heart beating, like. The inner mechanism of the NTC clock. That huge clock had marked every second of our torture: living in that hideous, sinking city. I took the silver suitcase from my backpack y placed it on the floor. Mamá had made me memorise the combination of buttons just by touching the detonator's surface. I caressed the left side.

I pushed the buttons.

Five minutes to go.

I rushed down the ladder back to the first room. I had to get to the balcony in the corridor y jump down to the water. A chill in my nape. I was not alone. I looked all over.

CLICK.

CLICK.

CLICK.

Thirty seconds gone. Nothing. I was alone. ¡Pero I was not! I considered ignoring the fact I had just seen a human shadow with me in the room. I just wanted to get the fuck out.

CLICK.

'Kerry...'

CLICK.

Time did stop at that moment.

CLICK.

'Ree, ¿what the fuck...?'

I wanted to die just right there.

CLICK.

'Kerry, it's not...'

She rushed past me y climbed up the ladder.

'What the fuck are you doing, just come here for fuck's sake, let's get the shit out of here...' I tried to follow her.

CLICK.

CLICK.

She was already in the upper room.

‘¡Don’t touch it, joder, it’s dangerous...!’

CLICK.

‘I just want to stop it...’ she shouted back.

CLICK.

‘¿What...?’

‘It’s not fair, ¿you know? Killing hundreds of people, even if some of them are evil. It’s not right. I can’t do it. I’ve told everyone to escape, to run away to the boat.’

CLICK.

The room twirled around.

CLICK.

‘¿You...? Ree, please, please, just come here. There’s no time.’

CLICK.

My legs were lifeless y the ladder infinite. I wouldn’t get there in time.

CLICK.

‘Yes, they’re all gone, and now I’m going to stop it, and we’ll go home, and nobody will know...’

CLICK.

‘Ree... Ree, listen, you don’t know how to... don’t touch it joder, come here now, I tell you... ¡Let’s go!’

CLICK.

I couldn’t go up.

CLICK.

‘It’s not that difficult, I’ve been observing Mamá and I...’ She sounded like she really knew what she was doing, like. I could almost see her smiling a bit.

CLICK.

I couldn’t go up.

‘LET’S GO NOW...’

I couldn’t.

CLICK.

'There we g—' </record>

<record> **DEEL 33.** *And the sun shone in Neo Dublin for the very first time*

They said:

-That the rain stopped. Some chemical reaction from the bomb created a light-mist that took over everything y during three minutes y thirty three seconds there was no rain at all, just light, shining all over the city.

-That the NTC had a purple glow around it that turned white. Deus had blessed all the Domini at the same time, lifting the whole building to the sky y the stars y beyond, so the Domini would be higher than the angeli.

-That the NTC started melting, y it was like when you throw a photo to the flames. Y it was a strange pero beautiful effect y the people who saw that still thought Deus' hand was in all that y it was some sort of miracle.

-That the NTC crumpled y disintegrated. It disappeared in a big ball of fire, an artificial sun created for Neo Dublin and just Neo Dublin. The sun shone over the whole city, y they said that all the city seemed made of gold, like the chalices in the NTC. All was perfect, pure y sacred under Deus' sun.

-That the sun sank into the waters. The barcos trembled violently, some of them went flying through the air. Barcos here y there, dancing like crazy. The floating houses had already sunk deep down pero the barcos were like dolphins y so they kept jumping over the waves for a while.

-That a tsunami, bigger than the NTC, was born. Deus monstrous tongue, they said, ready to devour this city of sins. The people who saw it knew their hour had come, y

they grabbed their children y their lovers y closed their eyes, y they even didn't bother with screaming because they knew they wouldn't be heard once the wave hit the city. Y the wave swallowed everything, y the bridges broke y sank, like veins of a collapsing body. Without its heart, Neo Dublin was no more than a corpse.

-That the waters reigned all over it. That, listen to me well, Hermanas, that was Deus' true will. And when the calm returned again (because it certainly did) there was

no city,  
no bridges,  
no NTC,  
no barcos,  
just quiet golden y blue waters.

I didn't see any of this, though. Ree's massive body disintegrated instantly, pero I'd been sent flying through the air, through the glass windows, and landed on the waters y they saved me from burning.

That was Deus' last joke.

I didn't die.

Y when I opened my eyes, Neo Dublin was no more. </record>

**CAMERA 553 – THE ROOM**

The boy finishes telling his story. His body is scarred with third-degree burns. He wears white overalls and a pair of rudimentary goggles.

One of the tall women sitting in front of him switches the recorder off. There are three women in total. Two of them wear military uniforms.

‘Dank je wel, that was good, Kerry,’ the woman with the recorder says. She’s the only one in civilian clothes. Her name tag reads ‘Anouk Boul. Literatuur en Geschiedenis Archief’. ‘Thank you very much for agreeing to contribute to our records. The Ministerie van Buitlandse Zaken will be informed and this will certainly be taken into account for your application. We are aware of the environmental conditions that accelerated the disappearance of Neo Dublin. However, it was the most prosperous floating city in Southern Europe, and your testimony will help us understand what really happened.’

On the chair, the boy bends his knees against his chest.

‘Are you going to send me to jail?’ he asks.

‘You are a refugee in the floating city of Amsterdam and Joined States. You have committed no crime here. And, as an underage human being, you cannot be taken to court. Besides, you’re one of the two survivors from Neo Dublin. You’re a valuable historical resource and you will be protected. Failing to do so would be like burning pages from our annals. And we might need you further.’

‘Will I get the citizenship?’

‘Well, it’s not that easy, I’m afraid. But some special arrangements will be made.’

‘Am I free to go, then?’

‘Not yet. You’ll have to go back to the camp for the time being.’

**CAMERA 278 – THE CAMP’S GARDEN**

A small concrete square. The sky is grey. It’s raining, but the drops are very thin. The boy puts his hood on and walks, with wobbly legs, like someone who is used to live on a boat. Water flows over his clothes without touching them. He’s covered in Sunnaluz. He heads towards a woman sitting under an apple tree next to an ornamental pond in the middle of the square.

‘Ya está?’ the woman asks.

The boy nods.

‘It was kind of... It felt good,’ he says. ‘You?’

‘I kept silent.’ The woman’s scalp is shaved and her eyes are the bluest sky in summer. She’s wearing similar white overalls to the ones the boy wears. ‘They have trees here,’ she adds.

‘Yes, all over the place, like.’

There are twelve apple trees surrounding the pond. The boy picks up an apple. Water can be heard flowing under the pavement. Light comes from the transparent dome.

‘We must purge Amsterdam,’ the woman says. ‘Purify their bodies.’

The boy leans over the pond and touches the water. He licks his finger.

‘It’s salty,’ he mumbles.

‘Being purified by the sun.... how does it feel?’ The woman holds the boy’s scarred hand carefully. He grimaces with pain. ‘I didn’t save you,’ she continues. ‘It was Deus’ will.’

‘This place is not The Garden of Delights, or whatever that shit was called,’ the boy says. ‘There’s no Eden here. No Infernum. No Deus either.’

‘We must complete our mission,’ the woman says. ‘Let’s go.’

She starts walking towards the empty camp.

‘No.’ The boy stands on the edge of the pond.

He looks at the apple he’s holding. He’s about to bite it.

He throws it away.

The apple sinks in the black waters.



# **QUEERING THE BULL**



I like fiction that seems to reinvent itself as it goes along... It doesn't start from a state of generic-genetic purity; it was hybrid to begin with. Each stage of its development is one of mutation from mutation, outgrowth from outgrowth. And yet, when it reaches the end, dies or slides off out of sight towards further incarnations, it is possible to discern that this creature-of-literature had a consistent form.... One of this premises may have been, for example, *Consistent identity is boring*. Another, more extreme extrapolation would be *Follow the line of development that promises the greatest instability of identity*. This is all extremely unsettling for some readers. But I like it. You could call it *headfuck fiction*.

— Toby Litt , *Mutants*

...for these monstrous times, we need monstrous novels: deformed novels that border on catastrophe, dare poetry, that are not afraid of the unpublished and the unspeakable. We want to awaken the monstrous power of the novel, its formidable power of demonstration. We want books that are, as Kafka wrote, can be an “axe for the frozen sea inside us”.

— Aurélien Delsaux, Sophie Divry and Denis Michelis,  
*Monstrous Times Call for Monstrous Fiction: A French Manifesto*



### **Following the bull**

This reflective essay looks at different aspects of my creative process that resulted in *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*. When I started writing this project in October 2015, my main objective was to create a trilogy of novellas that explored the connections between Ireland and Spain – such as the bull as a symbolic animal – through past, present and future.

To discuss my creative process, I have to start by defining what hybridity and fluidity mean in the context of the work. Hybridity is ‘the transcending of binary categories’ (Nederveen Pieterse, p. 238). I use the terms ‘hybridity’ and ‘fluidity’ to represent this transcendence; thus, I understand them as scales rather than fixed categories. Hybridity equals a static state whereas fluidity, ‘a perpetual displacement’ and ‘openness to resignification and recontextualization’ (Butler, 1990, p. 176), belongs to a performative space. In my fiction, hybridity and fluidity challenge purity. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman opposes liquidity to solidity in his book *Liquid Modernity* (2000) and this was an inspiration for my work. I conceive hybridity and fluidity – like liquidity – as having ‘extraordinary mobility’ and the ability to ‘pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others’ (p. 2). On the other hand, purity – solidity for Bauman – is ‘preferably perfect’ and something ‘one could trust and rely upon and which would make the world predictable and therefore manageable’ (p. 3).

Queer theology and speculative fiction have formed the framework of my writing. The first is a recently developed theological method that has its roots in queer theory. It is based on the assumption that gender fluidity has always been represented in the Bible. Some of the queer theologians who have had the greatest impact on my work are Gerard Loughlin, Gavin D’Costa and Marcella Althaus-Reid. The definition of ‘queer’ that I am using in my work comes precisely from Althaus-Reid, who says ‘The Queer subject is nomadic, unsettled and does not have a sedentary vocation’ (2003, p. 44). Hence, I see queerness as a reflection of movement, mutation that resists a stable categorisation. It is intimately linked to the ideas of hybridity and fluidity that I explored in the previous paragraph. As well as providing a context for my work, queer theology allowed me to engage with Catholicism, not with a

devotional or polemical intention, but in the spirit of rewriting, in a playful and open-minded sense, themes such as faith, incarnation and the body.

Althaus-Reid claims that ‘the queerness of sainthood has all but disappeared... decency and the legal sexual order of T-Theology... have become equivalent to the real lives of saints, eliminating gestures of defiance’ (2003, p. 141). As a writer, I am interested in resuscitating that primordial queerness of Catholic saints. That is why many of my queer characters – even when perceived as monsters by some – are ultimately enlightened, and even reach sainthood. On the other hand, those of my characters who commit to pure, stagnant concepts end up losing their empathy and become inhuman. Thus, I am using my writing to link the concept of the monster with humanity, and I will explain how I do so this in the following paragraphs.

The definition of ‘monster’ that I use in my work comes from the Gothic genre ‘...a hybrid figure... frequently credited with powers of transformation and shape-shifting’ (Palmer, 2016, p. 119). Because of this, I see monsters as the embodiment of hybridity and fluidity, and all the imperfect parts that make someone human. And, most importantly, they are capable of empathy. My reading into speculative fiction provided me with many examples of what I consider monstrous characters. For example, Evelyn, from *The Passion of New Eve* (Carter, 1977); a man forced to undergo sex reassignment surgery who tries to make sense of his new gender identity in a dystopian USA. Logan Hartnett from *City of Bohane* (Barry, 2011) would be another example; he is a ruthless gangster but also a faithful husband, ready to do anything to fix his broken marriage. As Toby Litt argues, ‘... it’s inescapable that *we* are the monsters’ and ‘The absence of monster would mean the absence of us’ (2016, p. 197). Someone inhuman, however, is a person incapable of empathy, who lacks ‘the human qualities of compassion and mercy’ (OED, 2018), which to me is infinitely more dangerous than monstrosity. Crake, the mad scientist from *Oryx and Crake* (Atwood, 2013), embodies what I consider an inhuman character, since he creates a drug that exterminates the whole of the human race. Captain Vidal, from *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006), is another example because he does not hesitate to murder his young stepdaughter, Ofelia, the moment he thinks she is helping the republican rebels in Francoist Spain.

Choosing the novella format was yet another way of queering my project, since this is intrinsically a hybrid form, too long to be a short story, too short to be considered a novel. Because the novella exists in the in-betweens, it is an ideal form for exploring liminal formats, voices, genders and genres. I used Saint Ciarán as the narrative link in my trilogy. He embarks on a journey to explore the three states of the Catholic faith: the finding of faith (*The Book of Cow*), doubt (*The Bull's Betrothed*) and apostasy (*Case File 477*). According to queer theologian Gavin D'Costa, the Holy Trinity '... opens many important avenues whereby "gender" is recast in a number of ways. It is possible to see how the divine life is capable of being represented in multi-gendered terms...' (2007, p.271). Hence, I felt that writing a triptych of novellas accentuated the queering of religion in my work.

Finally, I found that, when writing this essay, it was important to bring in some autobiographical components. I did so in the spirit of casting light on my writing process and the reasons behind some of my artistic choices. At the beginning of this project, I had been living in the UK for almost two years whilst pursuing a writing career. I was certain that the PhD programme would be the ideal place to improve my skills. Writing in a second language has made me extremely humble and open to learning everything I can about the craft. The PhD was an extreme writing challenge – *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán* is the longest piece I have ever written in English – but it also tested me in other unexpected ways. Looking back, I see how the time I have spent drafting this PhD project was also my coming of age as a migrant-author-queer-human. Many of the aspects I discuss and question in this essay I struggled with both on the page and in real life.

The first chapter of this essay looks at the way I have used gender as a performative construct to develop my characters, and reflects on the role of faith in creating gender identities. The second chapter focuses on my obsession with language and analyses the different strategies I used to queer it. The third and final chapter discusses how I mixed and altered genres in my work as well as my vision of the novellas as pieces in a larger, more complex structure: a novel in three parts.



## I

## QUEERING GENDER

*Is gender a matter of faith?*

*The role that Catholic religion and gender played in The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*

**Threshold**

In this chapter, I will show how I have used faith to queer gender in my writing. I first considered a connection between gender and faith when George Green asked me a question that haunted me for the most part of my PhD.

To answer this, I needed to establish what faith meant in the framework of my project. My reading on the field of queer theology showed me ‘the paradox of belief and non-belief’ and the proposed alternative of ‘fragmented subjectivity’ (Rudy, 2007, p. 45). Inspired by this, I decided to not see faith as something that my characters have or do not have. Rather than fragmented<sup>4</sup>, I see faith as a spectrum, something they can perform at different levels. In terms of my work, faith refers to any strong belief, often, but not always, motivated by Catholic religion. For instance, Kerry’s belief in homosexuality as a sin makes him violent towards his step-sister, Ree, and eventually self-destructive.

My characters’ pursuit of faith is usually prompted by curiosity and is blended with their search for knowledge. In this chapter, I will refer back to this connection that I explored in my fiction through the use of three real learning institutions: Clonmacnoise, the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (Institution for Independent Teaching) and The New Trinity College.

The performative element links faith with the depiction of gender in my work, ‘...an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler, 1990, p.179). Understanding faith and gender as

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to notice here that the Christian faith is also fragmented and has suffered many schisms and divisions.

spectrums one can move along, rather than as fixed categories, was important to me because it engaged with the theme of hybridity that links my novellas.

### **First circle: the rebirth of gender**

*Gender Trouble* (1990) questions the binary notion of sex – ‘if gender is something that one becomes... then is a kind of action that can potentially proliferate beyond the binary limits...’ (p. 143). Growing up in Catholic Spain, I was taught that gender fluidity was wrong, and even monstrous. It wasn’t until I started researching the connections between gender and Catholic faith that I realised that a view of gender as binary or pure is difficult to maintain, especially when reading the way the figures of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary are portrayed in Catholic faith and culture.

The image of Jesus on the cross – found in every church, every prayer room, and of course, my grandmother’s bedroom – embodies passiveness and surrender, qualities that have been traditionally ascribed to the female gender. I agree with theologian Mark D. Jordan in that ‘Jesus’ masculinity is somewhat curious. First, most Christian churches have conceived it as strictly celibate masculinity... a sort of eunuch masculinity’ (2007, p. 286). In fact, Jesus Christ’s body was depicted with obvious female attributes during the medieval period. Some of these are discussed in Liz Lorenz’s article *Christ's Womanly Wounds* (2013) by showing illustrations of medieval codices where Jesus’ mortal bleeding wound has an almond shape reminiscent of a vulva. He was said to have extracted the gospel directly from it, almost as if he had given birth to it (Lorenz, 2013).

Many artists have described Jesus Christ’s physical body as beautiful and sensual in conventional female terms. Gerard Manley Hopkins, a hybrid himself, – migrant, poet and Jesuit – wrote in one of his sermons,

There met in Jesus Christ all things that can make man lovely and loveable. In his body he was most beautiful... well built and slender in frame, his features

straight and beautiful, his hair inclining to auburn, parted in the midst, and clustering about the ears and neck as the leaves of a filbert... (1879, p.20)

Hopkins' obsession with the physical beauty of Jesus' body is also evident in his poems. In *The Windhover* (1876-1889, p. 69) Jesus is described as 'lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his'; In *I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day* (p. 101) Christ is referred to as 'dearest him'. Scholars like Julia E. Saville have linked this to Hopkins' supposedly repressed homosexual desires; 'Christ is the only figure who can legitimate sexuality for him without its becoming the site of corruption, anxiety and guilt' (2000, p. 120). Another poem, *The Bugler's First Communion* (1876-1889, p. 82) depicts a young soldier performing the Catholic rite of Eucharist. This composition is full of sensual allusions to the flesh of Jesus as an object of masculine desire and the boy is described as 'tender as a pushed peach'.

I used these insights about the complication of gender in Catholic culture to inform my depiction of the rite of the Eucharist in my creative work. In *Case File 477* there is a scene in which Kerry observes his classmate Sceilig passively receiving the injection of vitamin D. I used sensual language to describe Sceilig's taking of this dystopian host and show that Kerry gets sexually aroused. According to queer theologian Gerard Loughlin, this should not be all that surprising since 'If only at a symbolic level, all Christian men are queer, as when St Bernard and his monks yearn for the kiss of Christ'; Loughlin also acknowledges 'the homoeroticism involved in men loving a male God' (2012, p. 393).

The figure of Christ is not alone in being receptive to a gender-fluid interpretation. The Virgin Mary as portrayed in Catholic art and culture is also susceptible to this type of reading. In Althaus-Reid's words, 'One can easily argue that the Virgin Mary is the strangest thing in Christianity and scarcely needs anybody to Queer her...' (2000, p. 71). She is the female archetype every woman aspires to be as she portrays the 'feminine ideal' and 'woman's nature and duties' (Engelhardt Herringer, 2008, pp. 19-20). However, she is quite a contradictory figure, since she is able to conceive without having any physical intercourse with a male, as if she was

able to perform parthenogenesis. In physical terms, she is both the mother and the father of her son, closer to the androgyne that I explore in later sections of this chapter than to a real woman. As theologian Virginia Burrus points out, ‘...[the] virginity [of Mary] is then the bottomless womb of self-transcending infinitude... she accomplishes in thrilling integrity, at once, virgin and parent, one in flesh and spirit...’ (2007, p. 151).

Thus, the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ are closer to gender fluidity than to a fixed canon of opposites. Althaus-Reid points out that in countries such as Brazil ‘there is a transvestite Christian community which has adopted the Virgin Mary as a divine Drag Queen’ (2000, p. 79). Moreover, the Virgin Mary and Jesus share a role as feeders and, to an extent, spiritual providers. A lactating Virgin Mary is one of the few accepted depictions of the female breast in Catholicism (Engeldhart Herringer, 2008, p. 39). Jesus Christ is a man, hence, unable to breastfeed, but he offers the next most valuable fluid: blood, along with his own flesh – this is represented by the bread and the wine in the Eucharist and also by his ultimate sacrifice on the cross.

Finding this kind of gender fluidity in Catholicism gave me the freedom to write characters of faith who also challenge gender binaries – and indeed, whose performance of faith is indivisible from their shifting and fluid performance of gender. However, I encountered two main obstacles. Firstly, I wondered if characters are always conceived along with their gender or if this is a feature that comes later – as with human foetuses. Kirsty Logan, who has written gender-fluid characters in her book *The Gracekeepers* (2015a), told me in an interview for the podcast *The Writing Life* that ‘I don’t really think of my characters as male or female in general, actually, a few of my characters... are gender neutral... I just let the characters come to me... sometimes a character’s gender shifts as I’m writing them’ (2015b). I have had similar experiences: in *Case File 477*, Alcalá, Kerry’s sister, was a brother until the third draft. I made him female so the relationship Kerry has with Alcalá – he is very protective of her – contrasts with the one he has with Ree, his step-sister – who he often bullies but secretly fancies. The change was simple, as I just swapped pronouns.

Above all, it was important to me to make Alcalá female so when Kerry discovers her having sex with Ree, he is traumatised. In a society where gender is fixed and homosexuality is condemned, I believe that Kerry could not face the idea of seeing someone he respects so much as a ‘sinner’.

In *The Book of Cow*, I kept changing Chiaráin’s gender throughout multiple drafts. He started as male, but I made him female to show readers that his was not the story of a conventional saint. However, my supervisor, Eoghan Walls, did not see any reason why I should turn a traditionally male saint into a woman. Eventually, I got comfortable with the idea of Saint Chiaráin’s ability to move between the male and female gender. This reflects my statement of gender fluidity having a link to sainthood. Angela Carter’s *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), was my other main influence when writing gender-fluid characters. In Carter’s novel, the protagonist, Evelyn (Eve), is a young English male academic who travels to the USA, where he is kidnapped by a female-only sect that forces him to undergo sex reassignment surgery. Carter stated that ‘I don’t see much difference between men and women. The variations between people of the same sex are usually much greater’<sup>5</sup> (Carter cited in Lorentzen, 2017).

The second obstacle I found was English binary gendered grammar. Reading Maggie Nelson helped me engage with the limitations of language, since she has written about gender fluidity with a clear and shameless focus. Her book *The Argonauts* (2015) moves between many genres and forms, utilising the memoir, the critical essay and many other things in between. This shouldn’t be surprising since gender, genre and the essay have been linked before by writers such as David Lazar ‘the gender category difficult to characterize by normative standards is queer. The genre category difficult or impossible to characterize, the essay, is also queer. The essay is the queer genre’ (2013). One of the main characters in *The Argonauts* is Harry, Nelson’s partner, who doesn’t identify as female or male, and undergoes a mastectomy at the same time as Nelson is pregnant. ‘On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more male, mine more and

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<sup>5</sup> This idea was also expressed by Eve Sedgwick in her book *Epistemology of the closet* (1990, p. 25)

more female. But that's not how I felt it on the inside... we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other...' (p. 103). This description inspired me to see language not as a barrier but as a tool, since Nelson refers to her partner by using 'you' or simply 'Harry'. This way, she overcomes the binary gender based grammar the English language forces on our sentences and our thinking. I tried similar strategies to describe my characters in *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*, who fluctuate between national identities and genders.<sup>6</sup>

To sum up, fluidity, as a nourishing and productive force, has informed many of the decisions I have taken in my creative practise, such as my depiction of sainthood. In *The Book of Cow* and *The Bull's Betrothed*, I made Chiaráin and Ciarán both gender-fluid and breastfeeding saints. However, in the suffocating atmosphere of *Case File 477*, I decided that Sister Ciarana would interpret the notion of sainthood according to her apocalyptic reality. I felt it would be natural for her to recreate a more literal version of the Eucharist rite in which she feeds real (human) flesh to the starving inhabitants of Neo Dublin. In the subsequent sections of this chapter I will reflect on how my characters' performance of faith is linked to their performance of gender. I will start with those whose performance is pure and harmful, and gradually move towards a liberating fluidity until I reach the final transcendence of binaries.

### **Second circle: Kerry and the struggles of gender in a Catholic theocracy**

In *Case File 477* I explored – like Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) – the effects of a theocracy and how Catholic faith in this novella demands a 'correct' gender performance and punishes a 'wrong' one. I decided, very early in the creative process, that Kerry should be a hybrid and an outcast, so I gave him a Spanish mother and an Irish father.

When writing my third draft I resolved to subvert the normal roles of the ideal Catholic family – embodied by Mary, Jesus and Joseph – by making Kerry's mother

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<sup>6</sup> I describe these strategies in more detail in the chapter *Queering the bull with language*.

the main provider. At the beginning, she only worked as a cleaning lady in the New Trinity College, but then I thought I was promoting stereotypes by assuming cleaning would be the only job she was qualified to do. My plot demanded a character who builds the bomb. At first, it was going to be Kerry, but it occurred to me I needed someone with more expertise if this bomb was going to erase the New Trinity College from the face of the Earth. That is how Kerry's mother went from being a cleaning lady to an engineer and futuristic bullfighter, this being my ultimate subversion of her female role, since women bullfighters are extremely scarce, even nowadays.

Kerry's mother more fluid gender performance – as a mother, provider, gifted engineer and bullfighter – is punished in the context of my Catholic theocracy. This mirrors my own mother's experience. When she became pregnant without being married – she had been in a relationship with my father for more than seven years at that point – my grandmother was shocked and begged my mother to make her relationship 'right' for the child to come. My grandmother saw my mother's decision of not marrying as an act of treason, as she could not stand to hear people's comments on my mother's pregnant (and unmarried) body. This inspired the scene in *Case File 477* when Kerry's mother tells him how the priests laughed at her when she went to ask for work as an engineer despite being seven months pregnant. Writing this was important to me, as I saw it as a way to explain, within my plot, how years of frustration and repression could make someone build a bomb to erase the Catholic institution that has ruined her life because of her 'wrong' performance of gender.

The performative side of faith is enforced in Neo Dublin's theocracy through the New Trinity College, which indoctrinates both Irish and Spanish children. My intention here was to show how education can also be a system of repression, especially when it imposes a propositional idea of gender, as well as the consequences met by those characters who experience faith and gender more performatively. In *The Book of Cow*, faith and knowledge make Chiaráin free, but in *Case File 477* they are Kerry's doom. As scholar Shulamith Firestone argues:

the development of the modern school had little connection with the traditional scholarship of the Middle Ages... The real architects and innovators were the moralist and pedagogues of the seventeenth century, the Jesuits... "Discipline" was the keynote to modern schooling much more important finally that the imparting of learning or information... repression itself was adopted as a moral value.

(1971, p. 82)

I see the condemnation of homosexuality as part of this Catholic indoctrination which is also repressive as it refuses to understand gender categories as fluid. Homosexuality is stated as a sin in the Bible (The Bible, Leviticus. 18:22), but is also shown as an unspeakable crime in modern Catholic literature. For instance, in the science-fiction novel *The Sparrow* (Russell, 1996), a Jesuit priest, Padre Emilio, is sent to another planet to convert aliens to Catholicism. The priest comes back many years later, traumatised. By the end of the book, readers discover that Emilio has witnessed genocide, the death of all his friends, and had himself murdered an innocent alien child who was previously his friend, but somehow, his having sexual intercourse with another male alien is portrayed as a superlative evil.

I used Kerry's father to show how someone who has fixed beliefs on gender can be extremely harmful. When depicting this character, I had in mind other Biblical father figures who I have always found very upsetting, such as Lot. He offered his own daughters to the people from Sodom who came to his house wanting to have intercourse with the two visiting angels (The Bible, Genesis. 19:8). Equally, Kerry's father is worried about the violent behaviour of his son, but nothing horrifies him more than discovering that Kerry is having sex with another schoolboy. The homosexual inclinations of Sodom's dwellers are punished by God, but Lot's treatment of his own daughters is not. Moreover, it doesn't seem to offend God when Lot gets these two daughters pregnant (The Bible, Genesis. 19:36). I wanted to address these stories from a position of gender and faith fluidity and show those

characters with propositional attitudes to faith and gender as inhuman<sup>7</sup> – just like it happens in the dystopian short story *The Daughters of Lot* (Ashworth, 2015).

To do so, I decided that Kerry's father would reject his son once he learns of his homosexual tendencies. Something similar happens in the graphic novel memoir *Fun House* which, like *The Argonauts*, is a piece that queers both genre and gender. This story focuses on Bruce Bechdel, father of a Catholic family and a closeted homosexual, who continuously confronts his daughter Alison, a tomboy, and refuses to believe she's not comfortable wearing 'women's clothes'. He asks her: 'what're you afraid of? Being beautiful?' (Bechdel, 2006, p. 99). Bruce polices his daughter's performance of femaleness because 'correct' gender performance is a requirement of Catholicism. Kerry gives a 'wrong' performance of his gender, which results in his ostracisation. This was one of the ways I wanted my novella to explore the connection between successful gender performance, faith and inclusion – and to act as a contrast between the more fluid gender performances of the other characters. In *Fun House*, Bruce Bechdel cannot reconcile his role as a father in a Catholic family with his homosexuality, so he eventually chooses suicide. In *Case File 477*, I made Kerry's pressing of the detonator a direct result of his lack of empathy with the society that has rejected him. Forced to comply with a pure performance of gender and faith he, like his father, becomes inhuman.

### **Third circle: Carmen, the state of purity and the misogynist woman**

The character of Carmen in *The Bull's Betrothed* is in perpetual struggle with her gender, a struggle which results in self-harming habits and abuse. Her fixed beliefs, on what womanhood is and isn't, make her reject herself once she has been deprived of her ovaries and womb – and, hence, her ability to have children. Judith Butler points out that using sex to define gender is problematic because 'if external genitalia were sufficient criteria by which to determine or assign sex, then the experimental research into the master gene would be hardly necessary at all' (1990, p. 138) and 'XX males

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<sup>7</sup> As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, I am using using the terms 'monstrous' and 'inhuman' to mean different things – 'monstrous' is almost saintly, and certainly a creative form of fluidity, whereas 'inhuman' is a sterile, dangerous type of purity.

(having male genitalia) and XY females (having female genitalia) had been discovered and researched' (Page, 1987 in Butler, pp. 137-138).

My interest in hysterectomy and how I decided to explore the female gender through Carmen's perspective started when I was fourteen and my mother, still young, had to undergo a similar procedure to prevent the expansion of a cancerous tumour. The change in my mother's character was immediate, and our relationship turned sour – I was too self-centred in my own teenage dramas to understand the trauma my mother was dealing with. This inspired, to a certain extent, the mother and daughter aspect of the relationship between Carmen and Ciarán, in which there is love and care but also jealousy and possession. Besides, there is a memory that has stayed with me all this time, and that was an argument my mother had with my father, in which she asked him to look for other sexual partners within their relationship. She made it very clear she did not care about it as long as that made him happy but, she added, she did not want to pretend she enjoyed something she did not anymore. There is a similar scene in my novella, when Carmen admits to herself she does not find pleasure in having a physical relationship with her husband Pedro.

Now as an adult, and having had several partners, I realise how something like a hysterectomy can affect not only an individual but also a partnership. As women, our sexual organs are out of view, which meant my mother's wounds could not be seen. I do not remember her taking more than a few days off work after the surgery. And I never heard her talking about how she felt afterwards. I wonder, though, if things would have been the same if she had lost a leg or an arm instead.

The character of Carmen is also inspired by my own traumatic experience of adolescence, a time when I understood, to my horror, that I didn't fit in the 'woman' category. I hated the curves in my body, the hair I had to shave, the submissive role and the beauty tricks. I said many times then that I wanted to be a man. Not because I longed for a male physical body but for the performative part. I wanted to be aggressive, to take the initiative, to act without having to second guess myself or consider the way I looked. Petra Collins, a photographer interviewed in *The What's Underneath Project*, defines a similar experience: '... I started to grow hair... but I

was told to revert back to what I was like as a child. I lost total control on the view of my body.’ She goes on saying that ‘we are so obsessed with youth... it’s only in women between age fifteen to twenty that [kind of beauty] exists, and beyond that it’s not real’ (Collins, 2015). To draw attention to this in my fiction, I wrote the scenes where Carmen, controlled by her own fixed ideas on gender, infantilises Ciarán and adopts the role of a mother as she dresses the girl, bathes her and feeds her. The extract in which Ciarán refuses to eat for days has some dark undertones, and I wrote it so it would be disturbing for readers. Yet, it is mimicking the same struggle a mother could experience trying to feed a stubborn toddler. It is only strange because Ciarán is a seventeen-year-old woman. But, as Petra Collins points out, women are often patronised, even by other women, and I wanted to depict this through the relationship between Ciarán and Carmen.

I have already mentioned that one of the main reasons why Carmen refuses to perceive herself as a woman is her inability to have children. This is a direct influence of Catholicism, incarnated in the figure of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus. In twentieth century Spain, women were supposed to marry and breed – failure to do so turned them into outcasts of society. Federico García Lorca’s play *Yerma* (1934) explores this conflict through the character of a young wife who cannot conceive. Seeing her other female friends breastfeeding and raising healthy toddlers, she starts obsessing over her own sterile womb – as, of course, men were never questioned over fertility issues. Her frustration soon turns into madness and she proclaims ‘Ojalá fuera yo una mujer (I wish I was a woman, my translation)’ (Lorca, 1934, p. 65). According to Julia Kristeva, ‘by giving birth, the woman enters in contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself’ (Kristeva in Butler, 1990, p. 107).

This concept of motherhood as an inherent feature of femaleness is also explored in Patrick McCabe’s novel *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998). In this story, Pussy<sup>8</sup>, a transgender woman, goes through many struggles because Ireland’s Catholic society

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to remark here that the name of this character is also a slang word – sometimes derogatory – for female genitals.

condemns her feelings and behaviour. This again proves how the binary views of gender that Catholicism holds are very problematic, especially for those individuals who do not fit under its ‘man’ or ‘woman’ category. At the end of the novel, Pussy confesses that ‘...my fondest wish would be... to wake up in the hospital with my family all around me, exhausted after my ordeal maybe, but with a bloom like roses in my cheeks, as I stroke his soft and tender head, my little baby, watching them as they beam with pride...’ (McCabe, 1998, p. 199). Pussy believes she has to give birth to completely own the female gender. This is something impossible that she desires nonetheless, as if that was the final confirmation she need from the world, the final acceptance: ‘... watching them as they beam with pride’.

Throughout the novella, Carmen mourns the loss of her womanhood, suffers because she would never be a mother and even calls herself a monster. Yet, while editing, I realised that my character could not see monstrosity as positive – as I do in the context of my work. Her conscious commitment to the performance of gender is an act of faith that can be destructive and damaging. Scholar Claire Chambers suggests that:

women... voluntarily risk harming themselves, albeit to different degrees and with different levels of information, in order to conform... to social norms not only to please others, to avoid sanctioning from others or to gain their approval, but also to please themselves’ (2008, p.3).

This fixity of faith in its propositional rather than performative sense makes her not a monster but inhuman – as she’s often abusive towards herself and others, her ultimate act of violence being forcing Ciarán to get pregnant so she can have the baby. I strived here to show that faith that is not performative but based on a set of propositions can be both sterile and inhuman.

This said, after several drafts and a conversation with my supervisor, Jenn Ashworth, I understood that other characters – such as Pedro, and Ciarán – would see

Carmen not as an inhuman person but as a brilliant artist and a woman struggling with PTSD. After writing more about Carmen from Pedro's and Ciarán's perspective, I felt more satisfied about my characterisation of the sculptor since I felt that readers could empathise with her better by seeing her multiple sides.

In the end, I decided to have Carmen reject her own gender, not to demonstrate that fluid expressions of femaleness are inhuman, but to invite readers to explore the ways in which propositional faith and gender interact and make victims out of those who live within them.

#### **Fourth circle: Ciarán and the power of the gender-shifter**

To make sure that *The Bull's Betrothed's* treatment of gender was fluid and resistant to categorisation, I created the character of Ciarán, who challenges Carmen. The sculptor is trapped in the impositions of a fixed female gender, whilst Ciarán exercises an ability to make her own gender fluid and remain free. She first appears as a seventeen-year-old girl who is found in a catatonic state in the streets, and only starts reacting to Carmen when the sculptor fabricates a backstory for her and treats her like her nephew. Trauma linked to gender swap is also explored in *The Passion of New Eve* (Carter, 1977). Besides, in this book, gender is also linked to performance, since it is through clothes, make-up and other similar devices that Tristessa creates and enacts her female gender. The article *I wore men's clothes for a month – and it changed my life* (2017) by journalist Lucy Rycroft-Smith shows how clothes have a strong effect on how people perceive us – and how we perceive ourselves. She discusses the constraints of wearing female clothes, 'I've had to operate within a system that makes me less confident, more self-conscious, and generally in more physical distress than your average man' (2017). These two pieces inspired me to believe that my character Ciarán could indeed shift genders (from female to male) through performance and clothes, and that this would be believable for readers. Moreover, the change of gender is advantageous for Ciarán, because it allows her to move forward, since in the Spanish society of the time, there were very different standards for men and women. Carmen Baroja, a Spanish writer living in the 1930's, states in her autobiography,

Mi madre me acostumbró desde pequeña... para sentir la idea del deber... la moral de mi casa, muy a la *española*, era por lo demás rígida para mí en cosas pueriles y sin importancia y muy laxa para mis hermanos, en cosas que yo... consideraba importantes. (My mother taught me obedience since I was a child... morals, in the *Spanish* way, were the most important thing. At home they were extremely strict with me in things I thought stupid, and very lax with my brothers about other things I thought were important, my translation). (Baroja, 1998, p. 45)

Baroja, who lived during the tumultuous years of the Spanish Second Republic, had similar opinions on gender to Angela Carter's and Eve Sedgwick's,

‘Era la época del feminismo. Yo era francamente feminista, veía la poca diferencia que había entre los sexos (It was the time of feminism. I was, I must say, a feminist myself, as I realised back then there was little difference between sexes, my translation). (p. 68)

Carmen Baroja was not the only artist in Spain who challenged the ways the Catholic society of the time permitted her to perform her womanhood. There were many others, such as the Catalan painter Remedios Varo – who briefly appears in *The Bull's Betrothed* as Carmen's friend, ‘Reme’. Remedios Varo's artwork – for instance, her painting *Visit to the plastic surgeon* (1960) – embodies similar ideas to those of Claire Chambers as it depicts womanhood and self-harm going hand in hand. The stories of these real women who lived in the times in which *The Bull's Betrothed* is set, were key to my development of Ciarán as a subversive, gender-fluid character. In the end, I realised that I had given Carmen and Ciarán what writer Roxane Gay calls an ‘unruly body’ (p. 130), this is, a ‘monstrous’ body that defies the accepted norms of society. Gay uses this term to narrate her experience of fatness and trauma in her memoir *Hunger* (2017), but I believe that her story can resonate with anyone – such as Carmen, or even myself – who struggles with their body. As Gay states, ‘...I've been thinking a lot about feeling comfortable in one's body and what a luxury that must be.

Does anyone feel comfortable in their bodies? Glossy magazines lead me to believe that this is a rare experience, indeed. The way my friends talk about their bodies also leads me to the same conclusion (p. 274). Nevertheless, with the character of Ciarán, whose body has the ability to mutate, I want to recast Gay's term 'unruly body' as a positive one, since it offers a way of fighting against pure ideas of gender.

I was inspired to depict Carmen, Pedro and Ciarán's peculiar family after reading Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971), in which she states that pregnancy and motherhood make women inferior to men. '...the elimination of sexual classes requires the revolt of the underclass (women) and their seizure of control of *reproduction*: not only the full restoration of women's ownership of their own bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility... genital difference between human beings would no longer matter culturally' (p. 19). Firestone goes on by suggesting that babies should be gestated in artificial wombs<sup>9</sup>. The resulting children should be raised by a community. Firestone considers that the traditional biological family formed by a man, a woman and their children is 'an inherently unequal power distribution' (p. 17).

The biological family described by Firestone is very similar to the ideal of a Catholic family that has been imposed in Spain for centuries. Yet, I agree with Firestone in that it creates a unequal power distribution, and to draw attention to this in my fiction, I described the interactions between Carmen, Pedro, Ciarán and the baby, who subvert many of the paradigms associated with their own gender. Despite being part of an 'unholy' family, each of them find their place by exercising faith – once again, they choose to perform it; thus, they move through the faith spectrum to find their place. Carmen has faith in her creative process, and she believes that by becoming a mother she will finish her masterpiece and regain wholeness. Pedro finds relief in his own Catholic faith and his unconditional love for Carmen. Ciarán ends up believing she is a saint herself, able to revive a bull and stop the bombs falling over the Prado Museum.

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<sup>9</sup> This happens in the dystopian novel *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley.

In one of the final drafts of *The Bull's Betrothed*, General Márquez killed Pedro and Carmen but did not shoot Ciarán because, at that moment, she revealed to him that she was a woman and asked the monks for help (in English), confessing that she was really a nun forced to cross-dress by the family that had adopted her. This was, since the beginning, the original ending that I imagined for this novella. I was convinced I could not explain any other way why General Márquez would kill Carmen and Pedro but not Ciarán (and I wanted to keep her alive). However, my supervisor, Eoghan Walls, mentioned that this coming back to the female gender to survive was quite problematic. Firstly, it seemed to imply that Ciarán's masculinity had been a pantomime all the time, which would also mean that she was never a true gender-fluid character. Secondly, the fact that she would revert to being a woman the moment she surrendered seemed to state that maleness is power but femaleness is vulnerability. I had not realised until this point that my ending reinforced stereotypes associated with female characters – such as having the role of the victim. I decided to rework this final scene. I knew something unexpected had to happen – grandiose enough to save Ciarán's life – but not too random, because I did not want a *deus ex machina*. I went back to the idea of the breastfeeding male saint, a mystical image that I had already explored in *The Book of Cow* – male breastfeeding is also a theme in *Stillness* (Walls, 2017), which was an inspiration. I thought that if Ciarán started breastfeeding the baby, the soldiers – who had already assumed she was a man – would think they were witnessing a true miracle.

Thus, this final scene embodies my vision of purity as dangerous and even lethal, because it deprives individuals from empathy and makes them inhuman. General Márquez kills Carmen and Pedro because they belong to opposite sides in the war and the soldier cannot see past the 'enemy' category. However, in fluidity, Ciarán is strong and protected. Her embodiment of both masculinity and femininity by her breastfeeding of the baby finally makes her the saint she believes herself to be, and so General Márquez cannot bring himself to kill her.

### **Fifth circle: Saint Chiaráin and the annihilation of gender**

When devising Chiaráin, I decided to create a character who is able to move with ease between genders as well as between knowledge and faith. To do this, I took inspiration from alchemy, a discipline in which knowledge and faith are both intertwined.

Initially, I made Chiaráin an inquisitive character, and decided that curiosity would be what motivated him to advance in his journey; first among the Christian monks and then among the Fir Bolg<sup>10</sup>, until his final establishment of Clonmacnoise, a religious building and one of the first universities of Europe. However, my supervisor, Eoghan Walls, pointed out to me that Chiaráin's drive was not strong enough and the plot required more dramatic tension. That is how I decided to give Chiaráin a sister he loses at the beginning of the story so, apart from the more abstract goal of reaching knowledge and acquiring sainthood, he is also eager to find her. I felt that adding an emotional aspect to Chiaráin's search for ultimate knowledge would strengthen his faith and make him more of a sympathetic figure for readers. This also compelled me to stop seeing Chiaráin's faith as an absolute certainty. I understood it then as fluid, a spectrum he moves through by means of his actions.

Chiaráin's gender situation was also confusing in early drafts. As I have mentioned, I could not decide what gender would suit this character best. One again, I found inspiration in alchemy. In this discipline, enlightenment is linked to the transcendence of gender since 'the female-male androgyne... symbolises the completion of alchemical work' (Burckhardt, 1960, p.193). Something very similar is hinted in other ancient Christian texts such as *The Gospel of Thomas*, in which Jesus states that his disciples will enter Paradise '... when you make the male and female into a single one, so the male will not be male nor the female be female...' (Valantastis, 1997, p. 95). In fact, according to theologian Elizabeth Stuart, 'Earlier generations of Christians were much better at parodying gender than us' (2007, p. 69). Theologian Mark D. Jordan also points out that 'in the Catholic church, the normatively celibate priesthood has not infrequently been treated as a sort

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<sup>10</sup> These society of only-female cattle keepers was inspired by the Formorans and the real Fir Bolg from various Irish myths, (Markale, 1972) including those from the *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, also known as *The Book of Invasions* (Macalister, ed., 1938).

of third sex or intersex' (2007, p. 286). This – and my reflections on the gender performances of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary – confirmed to me that early Christianity was more accommodating to gender fluidity than the Catholicism I was taught, and I decided to draw attention to this through my fiction.

Therefore, I used the stages of work in alchemy to shape the stages of Chiaráin's journey through gender and faith (Burckhardt, 1960, pp. 182-195). My ultimate goal was to show to readers that enlightenment allows individuals to transcend binary categories and thus become fluid. To make this more evident, I set the character of Chiaráin in perpetual conflict with Queen Eanna. I decided the queen would embody someone who believes in the power of purity as a form of control. Because of this, I based her actions on the way she perceives the world around her as a collection of fixed binary categories. For instance, animals versus humans, people versus foreigners, allies versus enemies and so on. Chiaráin, on the other hand, exercises fluidity to inhabit the different spheres of cattle, the monks and the Fir Bolg. His passing through all these different places means that he also acquires secret knowledge such as the ability to speak Cow or breastfeed<sup>11</sup>. This fluidity – what philosopher Zigmunt Bauman calls 'liquidity' – is what allows him to 'pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others' (Bauman, 2000, p. 2) and eventually defeat his nemesis, Queen Eanna.

In conclusion, Chiaráin is, from all my characters, the one that moves further in the spectrum of faith to reach what in alchemy is known as the 'sixth circle', symbolised by the androgyne and a representation of unity (Burckhardt, 1960, p.193). I strived here to show, by means of my fiction, that faith is not always constraining – as I explored in the previous sections of this essay – but liberating if it is used as a performance to reach the knowledge that allows individuals to transcend binary categories and hence become fluid.

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<sup>11</sup> This aspect of my novella does not belong to the fantasy genre since male breastfeeding, like parthenogenesis, is theoretically possible, as the activation of milk ducts is linked to suckling activity and hormones (present in men and women), rather than pregnancy (Kunz and Hosten, 2009).

### **Sixth circle: Unity through the androgyne and conclusion**

Catholicism and gender share an important performative element, and they both can be queered through faith. In my experience, notions of Catholic religion are passed from parents to children and learned by example – just as with gender. However, strict rules and the absence of fluidity are often problematic for individuals. And these individuals, made inhuman by the imposition of purity and a propositional attitude to faith and gender, go on to act in inhuman ways.

Thus, it was important to me to write characters that sought – and used – faith to queer fixed ideas on gender. In this essay, I have shown their different journeys through gender and faith – from being inhuman to becoming saints – presented through the sixth different circles of the development of the soul in alchemy. Kerry is trapped in his belief of a fixed idea of gender – and cannot stand the dissonance between this and his own desire. Carmen consciously rejects stereotypes of the female gender, but ends up reinforcing them through her actions. Ciarán performs gender fluidity with more ease, despite being ultimately controlled by Carmen. Finally, Chiaráin is the seeker who acquires a vision that allows him to see beyond gender and thus be truly fluid.

It was difficult to write gender fluid characters; there are not many literary examples, and I had to deal with many paradoxes and nuances I was not initially aware of. But I kept persevering and now I can answer George Green's original question with a yes, as I believe that gender is a matter of faith. This is all I want to show through my character development: gender is a belief, not a fixed category. As such, it can be exercised through performance and expanded to accommodate individuals rather than used as a cage to trap them.



## II

### QUEERING LANGUAGE

*What techniques are used by multilingual authors to insert different languages in their writing and how I applied my knowledge of these in The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán.*

#### **Introducción**

I could write this chapter using foreign palabras, placing them strategically so that even if my reader did not know the lenguaje I am using, they could still entender them. Our brains are designed to recognise patterns. After two or three pages of *A Clockwork Orange* (Burgess, 1962) readers know that ‘ptitsa’ means ‘woman’ and ‘deng’ is money. In this chapter, I will discuss my study of how some authors have combined different languages along with English in their writing and how this has informed my decisions when writing *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*. When talking about my work, I will reflect on the strategies that I have adopted and why they work better with an specific kind of narrator.

#### **English-Spanish-Latin patois**

In *Case File 477* I created a patois, a bastardised version of English that includes Spanish and Latin terms. The definition of patois that I am using is the one given by John B. Thompson in his introduction to the book *Language and Symbolic Power* (Bourdieu, 1991). According to him, the term patois refers to ‘regional and purely oral dialects... defined negatively and pejorative by opposition to the official language’ (p. 6). Languages we cannot understand are scary and fascinating, in the same way that a tiger may be. There is that fear of the sharp claws, the fangs, but also the admiration of the exotic and the beauty of what we cannot comprehend. In my writing, I wanted to evoke just these kind of associations in readers. For instance, writing *A Clockwork Orange* or *City of Bohane* (Barry, 2011) in plain, standard English would not have

made them masterpieces in their own right. The first one would merely be a story of a hooligan; the second one, a Limerick-based soap opera with violent undertones. Instead, the unfamiliarity of the language catapults the audience to the future, a time where there is still place for wonder.

*Case File 477* shares many similarities with *A Clockwork Orange* and *Talk of the Town* (Polley, 2009). They all are stories about troublesome teenagers narrated in first person by using a patois. ‘I tek a coupla strides. I pull oppen me wardrobe door and rattle the hangers hangin there, ter mek it sound as if I’m on with summit useful, like tidyn up.’ (Polley, 2009, 4). Anthony Burgess’ story is set in a futuristic England; Jacob Polley chooses Cumbria. A patois, in Thomson’s words, is always in opposition to the official language. This subversion of language shows the rebellious nature of the narrators, and also their hybrid identity. It also contributes to the world building – it would certainly be strange to read about a fourteen-year-old from Carlisle speaking perfect BBC English. More generally, I opted to tell *Case File 477* through a first person narrator because I knew that the powerful and direct intimacy, evoked by this method, would help to lure readers into the unfamiliar speech of the characters.

There is no explanation as to why *A Clockwork Orange* mixes English and Russian terms in the novella itself. Perhaps it is because Europe has metamorphosed into a single nation where the United Kingdom and Russia are in leading positions and so they dictate what is mainstream. Blake Morrison, who writes the introduction to the 2000 Modern Classics Penguin edition of this book, states that ‘the Ruso-Anglo-American patois which Burgess devised had an additional bonus... of suggesting that male adolescent aggression was not merely a local British phenomenon’ (Morrison, 2000, in Burgess, 1962, p. xvi). It could also be because of Burgess’ travels to Russia and his evident interest in this country. Or, it could be due to the influence of the Cold War. What is clear is that, paradoxically, by avoiding the use of a standard English – which is the lingua franca of today, and hence, it could be claimed, has a universal currency – and mixing it with other languages, Burgess gave his literary piece a universal quality. Alex is not a citizen from any country we can recognise or point at, but that does not make readers feel distant. Quite the opposite: it adds to the attraction, because Alex exists in a future that readers may think possible in the years to come. If

*A Clockwork Orange* had been conceived in 2019 it might have been written in an Anglo-Indian-Chinese patois, but the effect would have been exactly the same.

In *Case File 477* I decided to give a historical explanation as to why Kerry – the main character – uses a patois formed by English, Spanish and Latin. The Irish gain control over the Iberian Peninsula because they have the monopoly of three important resources: Vitamin D, Vitamilk and Sunnaluz. They have also gained ownership over the English language, which they refer to as Irish. This was a deliberate choice from my part. I toyed with the idea of having them speaking real Irish, but in the end I decided that the irony of Irish people ‘owning’ English in a dystopian future where the United Kingdom is long gone, was more important for the story I wanted to tell.<sup>12</sup>

Language is a mark of social class in *City of Bohane*, where the characters speak an invented patois made of several English and some Spanish and Portuguese words. This wild mixture of terms and dialects shows Bohane’s multicultural community – a number of gangs who are in a constant fight to claim ownership over the city. It also creates an interesting contrast: *City of Bohane* is narrated with the grandiose voice of an omniscient third person narrator, the type of voice one would expect to find in an epic saga. The language, however, belongs to the outcasts of society. ‘Yes and here they came, all the big-armed women and all the low-sized butty fellas... the natty Africans and the big lunks of bog-spawn polis’ (p. 31).

In *Case File 477*’s theocracy, social classes are also divided by language and nationality, just as occurred in Bohane and medieval England. Irish people belong to the privileged class, the class that speaks English. Amongst them, is an upper-class of priests, who use Latin as the language of religion and politics. Spanish people, on the other hand, have to assume the role of second-class citizens. They use Spanish in their daily lives, although this language has been officially banned. I purposely presented Neo Dublin’s society as constrained and limiting. I believed this would be a

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<sup>12</sup> According to scholar Benedict Anderson, ‘Languages change, die out and mutate. What is called “English” today has little to do with the Anglo-Saxon language used in England before the Norman invasion (also referred to as Old English). It evolved throughout the centuries under the influence of Latin and, of course, French (the languages of one time England’s invaders) to result in Early English, quite similar to what is spoken now in this region’ (1983, p. 41).

consequence of my dystopian setting, since Robert J. C. Young states in his book *Colonial Desire*, ‘fixity of identity is only sought in situations of instability, of conflict and change’ (1995, p. 4).

When I created Kerry, *Case File 477*’s main character, I gave him an Irish father and a Spanish mother. Hence, I thought it would be natural for him to speak a patois formed by three different languages. For example, he uses the word ‘excommunicatio’, that refers to capital punishment, because he has only heard it in Latin; ‘joder’ is a curse word in Spanish and so on. Later, I realised he could also use speech as form of rebellion. Then, I made a deliberate decision to increase the number of Spanish words he uses, as these mark him a ‘the other’, an enemy of the society he despises.

However, I found writing a patois very risky. My main concern was that readers would find Kerry’s speech too obscure and, therefore, would lose the ability to follow and enjoy the narrative. I will describe now the strategies I devised to assure that Kerry’s voice – even when challenging – could be comprehended by anyone who had a command of the English language.

First of all, I made sure that English was the base language in this novella. There are only two ways in which I have abused English by stretching its grammatical rules. The first one, is the overuse of the word ‘like’, in similes and as a speech tag at the end of the sentence. I did this to mark Kerry’s English as hybrid. It was partly inspired by the English spoken in County Kerry, Ireland, where people tend to end their sentences with this same tag. Besides, my main character’s overuse of similes and hyphenated words such as ‘sun-like’, ‘cold-like’ and ‘potato-like’ resembles a strategy every learner of a new language, including myself, uses to supply their shortage of vocabulary. For instance, we may say things such as ‘four-wheeled vehicle’ instead of ‘car’ if we cannot remember that particular word. I gave this habit to Kerry to show that, despite his competence in the English language, he still refuses to speak it ‘properly’, as doing so would be surrendering to what he considers the oppressors. In fact, I would like to suggest that hybridity itself defies the very notion of culture, since culture ‘...has always marked cultural difference by producing the

other; it has always been comparative and racism has always been an integral part of it' (Young, 1995, p. 54). Hence, Kerry consciously uses his hybrid speech to attack Neo Dublin's mainstream culture.

When I introduced Spanish into Kerry's voice, I limited it to those words I knew could be easily understood by someone who didn't speak this language at all – for example, the specific place they occupy in a sentence makes the meaning clear. Connectors such as 'and' and 'but' were substituted by 'y' and 'pero'. I also decided to use the double exclamation and question mark (at the beginning and at the end of the sentence) which is the norm in Spanish. I considered it could be visually jarring for English speakers, but I decided to leave it in order to make readers aware that the voice they are hearing is an unfamiliar one. There is also the term 'hermanas'. It literally means 'sisters' and this is how Kerry addresses the people who are interrogating him. Instead of giving him a serious tone, I planned for Kerry to be insolent but also intimate (the word 'hermanas' suggests closeness). I wanted him to tell his story as one makes a confession: he is waiting for a catharsis and needs to trick himself into trusting his audience has the power to give him one, like penitents trust the priest they cannot see at the other side of the confessional.

In very specific occasions, I used a Spanish term followed by an English translation. This is the technique usually found in books written in two or more languages. In *The Sparrow*, Emilio Sandoz is a bilingual priest who speaks English and Spanish, and he says, '*Antes* – before, I mean. In the hospital' (Russell, 1996, p. 15). This assures that readers won't leave the book to check out the meaning of the word. My issue with this method is that it has the potential to disturb the flow of the narrative – that is the reason why I believe it is not found in *A Clockwork Orange* or *Talk of the Town*. It also seemed forced for Kerry. His hybrid language mirrors his fluid identity, and his subversion of language shows his opposition to the theocracy. Besides, I planned to show that Kerry uses language to gain power in the relationship between him and his audience; I allowed him to do so by including words and grammatical constructions I knew English-speaking readers would not be familiar with. Ultimately, Kerry is more interested in keeping control and making an statement than in making himself understood, so it would be slightly off character if he stopped

at every Spanish word to give the English meaning. He only does so when his interviewers ask for clarification, and at those times he is annoyed that he needs to explain what he means.

To conclude, Kerry's hybrid speech is a form of rebellion that defies not only Neo Dublin's status quo but the notion of culture itself. Culture, like grammar in language, tends to be fixed and rejects change; hybridity, on the other hand, does include the other because it transcends binaries. As such, it can be perceived by some as threatening and subversive. Yet, accepting hybrid voices – and celebrating them through stories such as *A Clockwork Orange*, *City of Bohane*, *Talk of the Town* and *Case File 477* – means to move forward.

### **Writing Spanish in English: problems and paradoxes**

I have already discussed why first person works particularly well with patois and imagined languages. Writing in first person is also what comes naturally to me as a writer. That is why using the third person point of view in *The Bull's Betrothed* proved to be tricky. I had trouble in selecting which thoughts from the main characters (Carmen, Ciarán) I showed to readers. Moreover, it was difficult to delineate the focus of my narrator – as opposed to my personal focus as the writer. This was most challenging when having a very passive yet pivotal character in the plot. In the second section of the novella, narrated through Carmen's point of view, Ciarán is in a catatonic state. She does not move or speak and refuses to engage despite Carmen's countless efforts. Yet, she is the focus of every scene and all that Carmen can think of. Works such as *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925) inspired me to construct Carmen's voice as a peripheral narrator. By having this kind of narrator, I invite readers to get closer to Carmen, since they will feel more like her – curious and frustrated – than Ciarán – mysterious, magical, otherworldly. My intention is to give readers the power to judge and control 'the other' (Ciarán), and shock them when Carmen takes this authority a bit too far.

*The Bull's Betrothed* is set between 1931 and 1936, in several locations in Spain. In this piece, I was determined to use flawless standard English. Paradoxically,

it is the one piece of the trilogy that is set in Spain with mainly Spanish characters. Therefore, the novella is based on the assumption that even when written in English – with some Spanish words used very occasionally – the story is happening in the realms of the Spanish language. This is the case of *Number9dream*, a novel by David Mitchell (2001), which is set in Japan with Japanese characters but is written in English. It also happens in *Kintu*, by Jenny Nansubaga Makumbi (2014), a fascinating account of Ugandan history written in English rather than Swahili or Luganda.

This paradox (writing in one language while having readers assume the story is happening in another) has fascinated and worried me for a long time. However, the language a story is written in can in no way limit the space or culture in which the story is set. Saying that I need to write in Spanish in order to set the story in Spain, is as unrealistic as suggesting that I need to have sex reassignment surgery and become a man if I ever want to write a male character.

In *The Bull's Betrothed*, the most challenging sections were those narrated from Ciarán's perspective, since her first language is English. The third section, *Saint Ciarán of the Blessed Bull*, is a notebook where Ciarán writes, in alphabetic order, new Spanish words she is learning in an attempt to improve her vocabulary. My supervisors asked me many times if she was writing this personal dictionary in English or Spanish. To show to readers that she is writing the whole document exclusively in Spanish, I decided that each new term would act as a title for each entry and would not be translated – although readers can know what each word means after reading what Ciarán writes about it.

I wanted to indicate two things: firstly, that Ciarán's knowledge of Spanish is already good. Secondly, she is not just learning a language, she is also fascinated by it and wants to use it to create stories. There is a learning curve too; the first dictionary entries are far more simple, the tone slightly childish. Later, the voice evolves and the use of language flows more naturally. Ciarán uses more advanced devices such as the setting of the scene, elaborate description and dialogue. She starts the dictionary as a mere exercise for herself but ends up writing for an audience. She has become a writer through this process.

The fifth section, *The Death of the Trees*, is narrated in a close third person from the point of view of Ciarán. There are times in the chapter when Ciarán communicates in English. This was rather problematic to represent, as it required finding a way to distinguish English-that-is-Spanish from English-English. This paradox already worried me when writing my first novella in English, *McTavish Manor*. In this story, one of the narrators is a Spanish-born black maid living in the Highlands. Many of my first readers argued that her use of English was too elaborate and literate for someone who has only lived in Scotland for a couple of years. I had to devise strategies to convince my audience that her first person voice narrative was in Spanish despite the fact that it is written – like the rest of the novella – in English. One of these was, like in *The Bull's Betrothed*, adding Spanish terms to the English speech to remind readers that my narrator speaks English-that-is-Spanish.

I have been observing that, when two languages are mixed into the same narrative (like in *Kintu*, written in English but set in Uganda) the author can deal with the language issue by inserting some foreign terms to add flavour and realism to the writing. Generally, the second language is written in italics, 'It was surrounded by women dressed in *busuuti* and a few in *kitenge* prints' (Nansubuga Makumbi, 2014, p. 244). I always felt slightly bothered by this format, because italicising one language presents a hierarchy to readers in which the italicised tongue is marked as 'the other'. It could also imply that the narrator gives different importance to the languages they speak. Besides, in practical terms, grammar and spelling are pretty straightforward in making a contrast between languages. Like Junot Díaz confesses, 'I'm in two languages... I live a life where both English and Spanish are in italics in my brain' (2016). By blending languages, I want to draw attention to the fact that many of my characters are migrants, perpetually moving between languages. I want to give readers the power to choose which words they understand, and if they are unfamiliar with some terms, I hope that their experience of otherness will make them feel closer to the struggles of my characters.

This said, I did use italics in the last chapter of *The Bull's Betrothed*. It was not to show foreign terms but to signpost those few occasions the characters were truly

speaking English-English and not English-that-is-Spanish. For example, when Ciarán encounters the Irish soldier from Roscommon.

### **Gendered language and new pronouns**

In the last section of the novella, narrated in a close third person from Ciarán's point of view, gender and language were my main problems. At this point in the plot, I considered her to be a gender-fluid character: navigating between femaleness and maleness, even when she purposely dresses as a man. I researched the different pronouns that can be used for someone who is gender-fluid, but I did not find a definite answer. One of the most obvious choices, 'they', ended up being quite confusing. The last chapter of my novella involves turbulent scenes, as it is set in the Spanish Civil War and the siege of Madrid in November 1936. Other options were 'Ze' or 'Xe' – clearly explained in the article *Beyond 'he' and 'she': The raise of non-binary pronouns* (Chalk, 2015) – but I had issues with them sounding too alien in the historical setting of my novella.

I finally decided to go with 'Ne', which I found neutral enough in both sound and spelling. However, after rewriting Ciarán's section with this new pronoun, I was not satisfied. Considering that my text already demanded a lot from readers – since it incorporates Spanish terms and various points of view and formats – adding yet another layer of complexity, by this change of pronouns, seemed a bit too much. My own discomfort also made me question the fluid gender nature of my character. I wondered if Ciarán considers herself a man after all. She is comfortable dressing as such and enjoying all the freedom that men would have had – as opposed to women – in 1930's Spain. Yet, it seemed that, in Ciarán's particular case, adopting the male gender was a skill she had, like speaking another language. Indeed, the main feature of this character is her ability to adapt to challenging situations. Like a chameleon, she rapidly changes her skin, quickly enough to survive. For most other people, being able to switch between genders might have taken years, as well as generating many moral internal debates or other self-imposed restrictions. For Ciarán, however, it is something simple, because, as Erisychton of Thessaly's daughter (Hughes, 1997, p.

85), she has a gift for shape-shifting. Therefore, I decided that the best way to show how she has truly transcended the binary categorisation of gender was not to give her another pronoun – which seemed to imply that she needed to invent yet another category to fit in – but to use the female and male pronouns in different parts of the novella which, in her case, are stretched beyond categories and limits by means of her performance. I was inspired to do this by Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, in which Harry, Nelson’s gender-fluid partner, is forced to choose between Mr or Ms and decides to go with Ms ‘to take one for the team’ (Harry in Nelson, 2015, p. 170). Therefore, I hope readers sees my decision to use both ‘she’ and ‘he’ for Ciarán as a reflection of the character’s ability to metamorphose rather than an inconsistency.

### **Translating Cow**

Language in *The Book of Cow* proved to be even more difficult than creating Kerry’s patois in *Case File 477*. Saint Chiaráin’s story was the original plot of this project. I first came across him during my first visit to the monastic ruins of Clonmacnoise back in 2010, when I was living in Ireland with a local family.

The thing that stood out for me about Saint Chiaráin was that he was often accompanied by a cow. I envisioned him riding this animal – which surely would have called attention to himself as, after some research, I learned that the bone structure of cattle makes them quite uncomfortable to ride. In one conversation with my supervisor, Eoghan Walls, about this image, he suggested – almost as a joke – that the novella could be narrated from the point of view of the cow. I laughed at his suggestion, but I also saw it as a challenge. There are many speaking animals in literature – Aesop’s Fables (1998), Grimm’s tales (2014), the *Just So Stories* by Rudyard Kipling (1902) and *The Book of Chameleons* by José Eduardo Agualusa (2004). I wondered if I could write a story narrated by a cow able to fit my project and engage an adult audience.

My first attempt was trying a third person point of view with the cow as peripheral narrator. I thought it would be interesting not to disclose to readers that this

was the voice of an actual cow. The result was obscure and too confusing, so it soon became evident that I would have to dispose of this whole first draft.

In my second attempt, I focused on creating a Cow language. I used similar devices to those that proved to be helpful when creating Kerry's patois. After doing much research on cows – that included visiting a Cow Sanctuary in the Spanish rural town of Cercedilla and a milk farm in North Yorkshire – I gained an understanding of how cows perceive the world. For instance, I learned that their primary sense is smell, they have panoramic vision and they create extremely strong bonds within their herd.

I decided to use all these qualities to construct my first person narrator voice. I also invented 'Cow words' (inspired in Spanish) that named things such as 'sky' (manto), 'grass' (hierbacielo), 'humans' (dospatas). Nevertheless, the final result was disappointing. Cow language kept being too difficult to understand. Looking for a bit more clarity, I tried to substitute my Spanish-inspired words by others that came from English – for instance, I used 'twolegs' instead of 'humans'. It didn't work either. I felt readers would be too busy trying to understand the different terms and who this narrator was instead of enjoying the story. So I also abandoned this second draft.

At that point I was feeling quite frustrated, since, as a writer, I am more used to rewriting and recycling drafts, rather than having to reject them completely. Therefore, at the end of my first year, I decided to put *The Book of Cow* aside. In the meantime, I read, on the advice of by my supervisor, Eoghan Walls, *Grief is the thing with feathers* (Porter, 2015) and the poem *Cattle Ancestor* (Murray, 1993). To these two texts I owe the fact I persevered with Cow at a point when I already felt defeated.

*Grief is the thing with feathers* is a brilliant experimental novella. Its author, Max Porter, achieved something truly original with it since he create a Crow language:

What good is a crow to a pack of grieving humans? A huddle.

A throb.

A sore.

A plug.

A gape.

A load.

A gap.

So, yes. I do eat baby rabbits, plunder nests, swallow filth, cheat death, mock the starving homeless, misdirect, misinform. Oi, stab it! A bloody load of time wasted.

But I care, deeply. I find humans dull except in grief. (pp. 15-16)

There are no Crow grammars or dictionaries available, but this voice feels like Crow at a visceral level since it is intense, wild and fearless, like the cawing of these birds, a sound that rarely goes unnoticed.

On the other hand, *Cattle Ancestor* gave me a whole new perspective on cows as fictional characters. Being written by a bull, the voice was not comical or childish but powerful and of a mythical, almost God-like resonance.

Darrambwali and all his wives, they came feeding from the south east  
back in that first time. Darrambwali is a big red fellow,  
terrible fierce. He scrapes out dust, singing, whirling his bullroares  
in the air: he swings them and they sing out Crack! Crack! (Murray, 1993)

I had envisioned Cow as the language of those who were enslaved by humans and forced to live between fences until the day they would be slaughtered. This poem changed my mind. Cattle are beautiful, strong animals, faster than horses. They have been considered sacred and a representation of deity in many regions of the world (including India and Mesopotamia) and they were symbols of power (before gold and

other precious metals) in the Iron and Bronze ages, which explains texts such as *The Táin*, in which the ownership of a white bull starts a war<sup>13</sup> (Sherwood, 2009).

By the second year of my research, I had decided on two things. The cow was going to be wise and have a superior, almost divine consciousness – like in *Cattle Ancestor*. A conversation with my supervisor, Eoghan Walls, about Catholicism, gave me the idea of positioning Saint Chiaráin as the intermediary between God and cattle in the context of my fiction – just like Jesus Christ is the intermediary between God and humanity. His cow would be a kind of guardian angel or spiritual master that would guide Chiaráin through his journey. This is how the cow voice changed from first person to omniscient narrator. The only aspect I kept from my previous drafts was the importance of smells, since this forced me to be more creative with my descriptions.

To inform this new God-like voice, I read many extracts from the Bible and *The Gospel of Thomas*. The latter was especially useful since it was inspiring to read a text that was fascinating but also obscure and mystical. I could not be sure if Jesus Christ's words were supposed to be understood as a philosophy, a religious tale or a real story. My third rewriting of *The Book of Cow* was influenced by this piece. I added many obscure cattle references to my writing and made the cow narrator's voice grandiose as she described Saint Chiaráin's journey from Spanish pilgrim to patron saint of Cattle: 'And cattle came to Chiaráin and they asked him, "We are killed in sacrifice to content the Gods. Is that our purpose in life? Shall our blood forever taint the sacrificial stone?" Chiaráin said, "Bend your necks no more but follow me. For I shall not allow the slaughtering of such a glorious race"'.

Once this third draft was done, I decided to include another language in it. I decided that the true Iberian language must have been Basque since this was the only region in the peninsula not to have been invaded by the Romans. Hence, I translated some English terms into Basque – only those I thought readers would understand by context. This was the result: 'Queen Eanna brought her soldiers to Loughmichnois

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<sup>13</sup> I discussed at length how I used cattle in the context of my fiction in a critical chapter titled *Queering the Bull by Milking Him*. However, due to space restrictions, I was not able to include this piece in my PhD thesis.

shores. Her gizaheifer warriors of naked gizabreasts and sinewy gizaquarters grasping their horses' back. They all carried sharp ezpatax. Clay and acid: purple and gold sacrificial paint on their faces and gizabreasts'.

Needless to say, that third draft was also a complete failure. In retrospective, I can now see a high fantasy tone, possibly influenced by books such as *The Lord of The Rings* (1954) and *The Odyssey* (1996), both pieces that I love but were not what I was aiming for with my project. Above all, the mix between Basque and English was jarring and did not add anything to the plot.

Entering the last third of my second year of research and having to dismiss my three different approaches to *The Book of Cow*, I felt very frustrated. It was then that Eoghan Walls advised me to read *Sweeney Astray* (1983) – translated by Seamus Heaney – and *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (1997). Once again, these books allowed me to cross yet another threshold in devising my narrative voice. *Sweeney Astray* is set in Ireland and tells the story of a warrior who is turned into a bird after having abused a saint. This is a book that effortlessly blends dark events with comedy:

– How will you die? Sweeney asked.

– That's simple, Alan said. I will proceed now to the waterfall at Doovey, where a blast of wind will unbalance me and pitch me into the waterfall, so I'll be drowned. Afterwards, I will be buried in the churchyard of a saint. And I'll go heaven. (...)

The Briton set out for the waterfall and when he reached it he was drowned in it. (1983, p. 58)

This book was a revelation, since it proved to me that tales set in the Early Middle Ages did not have to be serious. *The Sagas of the Icelanders* was a similar case. What I learned from this piece is that an omniscient narrator can describe the most strange and impossible events with absolute normality. For instance, in one of the stories, titled *The Tale of Thorstein Shiver*, a man goes to the toilet and finds a little demon; they both engage in a conversation (713). As my supervisor said, 'the lack of wonder is a wonder in itself' (Walls, 2017a).

My conversations with George Green confirmed for me that I was on the right track. During my first year of my PhD I had read his novel, *Hound* (2004), which, like *The Book of Cow*, is set in Ireland's mythical past. George Green had approached the epic from a fresh and juvenile perspective, narrating his story from the point of view of Cú Chulainn's – *The Táin's* main hero – witty squire. Hence, this is an engaging adventure story written in contemporary English that still has the characteristics of a good epic quest. I asked George Green how he had managed to connect with characters from such an obscure and distant past. He told me it had been incredibly difficult – there is almost no written material from sixth century Ireland. Nevertheless, someone had told him that a good historical novel should read like a translation of a written document from the period. Intense, strange, wonderful, it should be a piece from a language and a time frame nobody can fully comprehend or access because of the ineluctable gap between the original work and the new version of it written in a complete different language.

That thought enlightened my whole creative process. I could fully grasp what I had been trying to do for more than two years. I didn't have to create Cow. Cow had been there all the time, spoken by cattle, of course. I had to translate Cow to narrate the story of a Spanish pilgrim who travels from the Iberian Peninsula to Ireland looking for the secret knowledge of a mythical Bull God. Hence, I wrote the fourth draft of *The Book of Cow* in plain English but with this idea in mind. And, for the very first time, the narrative voice flowed naturally. Furthermore, I had fun and enjoyed the process, something that I had not experienced with the previous drafts when all I felt was the anxiety of not being able to devise a believable Cow language.

One of the changes I incorporated to this new draft was the addition of different formatting, to show readers that *The Book of Cow* is meant to be the translation of an ancient manuscript. For example, I used dashes instead of quotation marks in dialogue. I also structured dialogue and my characters' soliloquies as poems, which is something that is done in *Sweeney Astray*. I have never attempted to write poetry before, and I knew that the PhD was not the place to test my abilities. However, after positive feedback from my supervisor, Walls, who is a poet, I realised that nobody expects translated dialogue from a sixth century Irish book to look anything

like dialogue today. Particularly because it is impossible to know how Old Irish sounded when read aloud, so nobody can understand its rhythm and meter.

In *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, characters' soliloquies are also written in the form of poems whose metaphors are so obscure that they need to be explained in footnotes. For instance, 'wave-changer' stands for 'ship' and 'valkyrie's warm wind' means 'battle' (p. 591).

Another new addition was constructing my story in *The Book of Cow* around small vignettes, as happens in the Bible. I also decided to finish them with dramatic closure. This was influenced by my reading of *Confucian Analects* (1971), a text I found similar in its philosophical quality to *The Gospel of Thomas*.

So, in the end, I didn't create Cow, but I discovered how to translate it.

## **Conclusión**

In this chapter, I have reflected on the different ways I queered language to accommodate the different realities of my narrators, who, ultimately, are all hybrid characters. My research led me to discover that some of the tools I was using to mutate language work better with one specific kind of narrator. For instance, an invented patois can be seen as quite a risky artistic choice, but I believe that using a first person narrator – like in *A Clockwork Orange*, *Talk of the Town* and my own *Case File 477* – eases the reading experience and it also reflects the multilingual reality we all live in. In the *Bull's Betrothed*, I struggled with the idea of writing a story that is really happening in Spanish in standard English. Ultimately, I found italics quite useful to mark English's different correspondences in my fiction – rather than using them to create a hierarchy between languages. When confronted with the decision of using non-binary pronouns, I initially decided to use the standard non-binary 'they' to refer to Ciarán. However, it proved to be too confusing since I was writing fast-paced scenes set in the Spanish Civil War. Thus, I opted to expand the meaning of 'she' and 'he' to accommodate the gender fluidity of my character. Finally, writing *The Book of Cow* from the point of view of a cow proved to be most challenging as I found many

problems trying to use human language to give voice to an animal. Eventually, books such as *Grief is the thing with feathers*, *Sweeny Astray* and *The Sagas the Icelanders* inspired me to recreate the translation of a sixth century text, and this kind of language gave me the artistic freedom to bring to the page the story I wanted to write.

All in all, my testing, stretching and hybridisation of the English language is my proof, through the writing I do, that language is not a pure fixed construct but a fluid tool. Whereas it is true that English has binary-gendered grammar, I believe that is possible to transcend this and many other rules to accommodate the reality we live in – and even imagine a new, more empathic one, that welcomes individuals rather than categorising them. As multilingual writer Jumpa Lahiri says: ‘I write on the margins, just as I’ve always lived on the margins of countries, of cultures. A peripheral zone where it’s impossible to feel rooted, but where I am comfortable. The only zone where I think that, I belong (2015, p. 94)’.



### III

#### QUEERING GENRE

*How I used genre to create an alternative history that explores the links  
between Ireland and Spain*

##### **Introduction**

In previous chapters I have written about queering language and gender. In this final chapter, I will refer to the way I used *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán* to challenge and complicate notion of genre. This developed from my work exploring gender, as David Lazar states, ‘genre and gender are indissolubly linked, etymologically intertwined... Genre is a category after all. So is gender’ (2013).

My project explores the genre of historical fiction in several clearly articulated ways, since history had a major impact on the way I devised plots and engaged with world-building. I understand historical fiction according to A. S. Byatt’s definition ‘... a large body of serious and ambitious fiction set in the past, not for the pleasures of escapism or bodice-ripping, but for complex aesthetic and intellectual reasons. Some of it is sober, and some of it is fantastic... some of it is feminist or post-colonial rewritings of official history...’ (2000, p. 93).

My first idea for this project came from an article titled *Genetics and the Origins of the Irish* (McEvoy and Bradley, 2008) that showed evidence of a prehistoric connection between Ireland and Spain – with travellers from the Iberian Peninsula settling in Ireland and becoming its first inhabitants. I decided that my novellas would imitate historical documents. *Case File 477* is the recording of an interview kept as a historical record; *The Book of Cow* is the translation of a sixth century Irish codex; *The Bull’s Betrothed* includes letters, a diary and a published short story written by the main character. However, *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán* cannot be categorised as historical fiction, since I purposely queered history by merging it with elements from weird fiction, gothic, magic realism and science-fiction dystopia. These three novellas not only explore the fluidity of language and gender but also, as I will demonstrate, deconstruct the historical fiction genre. In this chapter, I

will reflect on how historical events influenced and intruded into my writing in order to reach beyond past events – the most common ground for historical fiction. I will also analyse how I use the novellas to engage with imagined realities and proposed futures, taking them into the field of speculative genres.

## Past

### *The killing of the trees*

In 2016, when I was researching the Institución Libre de Enseñanza (Institution for Independent Teaching), I came across an article on an obscure Spanish website called *Lugares con historia* (Places with history). According to this article, the Institución Libre de Enseñanza had a lush garden until 1939, when – once the dictator Franco had finally got control over Madrid – a group of fascist soldiers cut down all its trees. Only a privet and an acacia tree survived (Ramos, 2015).

While I was writing *The Bull's Betrothed* I read much about Madrid's siege during the Spanish Civil War: the bombings, the starvation, the senseless violence. However, this story about the trees shocked me and I found myself obsessing about it. Did the soldiers want to make a statement? Was the felling of those trees a metaphor for the annihilation of the liberal education and open-mindedness that the Institución Libre de Enseñanza had brought to Spain? Was it the random act of a group of psychopaths? Or, perhaps, was it very cold in Madrid that year and they needed the wood?

I haven't been able to find evidence to confirm this anecdote in any other sources apart from the one I mentioned, but I felt, like Byatt, that 'absence of information starts the imagination working...' (2000, p. 102). Besides, when I tried to visit the Institución Libre de Enseñanza in 2017, I was forced out of the building by a porter, who didn't seem very impressed when I told her that I was doing a PhD and writing a book that featured this location. She claimed the Institución Libre de Enseñanza just hosted private events and that I should contact them through email to arrange a visit. I am still waiting for an answer. Spain keeps being, as nineteenth

century journalist José Larra puts it, the country of ‘vuelva usted mañana (come back tomorrow, my translation)’ (1833, p. 10) where nothing ever gets done.

This anecdote about the IFT’s garden is important, because I used it to inform my writing in the last section of *The Bull’s Betrothed*, titled *The Death of The Trees*. Nevertheless, I encountered two main problems. First of all, the fascist troops didn’t enter Madrid until the end of the war, in 1939, but my novella finished in 1936. Secondly, not having the fascists inside the city meant that there were no antagonists in my scene to perform the cruel act. I briefly considered not writing about the trees but I felt that the plot would miss a climactic moment. While historical fiction seeks to dramatise recorded events from the past, here I moved historical facts into speculative fiction, so I brought the garden incident to 1936. Taking the fascists into the city, though, seemed more complicated – as in November 1936 Madrid was indeed attacked by the fascist troops, but their attempts to gain control over the city were frustrated by the International Brigades and the mythical fifth regiment from the republican army.

***‘Grandma, who is that man with the swastika?’***

In April 2016 I went to visit my grandmother and asked her to show me her photo albums from the war period. There was a picture that immediately caught my attention: a fair, handsome young man with a swastika pinned to his lapel. When I asked my grandmother, she told me, unconcerned, that he was her older brother – who died many years before I was born. I was deeply disturbed, but then, I went over all the stories of the war my grandmother had been telling me since I was a little child – the conflict started when she was nine years old. She talked about hiding in the cellar while planes were bombing the city, about her father joining the army and going to the barricades every night to protect his family. In my imagination, the ones dropping the bombs and shooting at my great-grandfather were the bad guys, the enemy, the antagonists, the fascists. It struck me just then that my great-grandfather had actually fought for Franco and the fascists who, at the time, had been supported by Mussolini and Hitler.

I was faced with the question – born from my personal experience and my academic research – about how far it was possible to empathise with the ‘bad guys’ in history, and how far a historically engaged piece of fiction could go in depicting these characters sympathetically. It was a question that felt increasingly relevant, especially in the aftermath of the Manchester Bombing of 2017. Speaking in a podcast interview right after the attack, singer and writer, Amanda Palmer, criticised Theresa May’s words, since the British prime minister stated that ‘if our human rights laws stop us from doing it, we will change the laws so we can do it’ meaning that she would overturn human rights if needed, in order to punish the terrorists (May in Spurrier, 2017). Palmer’s interviewer, Jen Long, immediately declared she would never be able to empathise with the terrorists. Palmer, on the other hand, explained ‘I feel like there is a way to separate looking at a human being who is down to whatever path of extremism and insanity and indoctrination... behind all that shit there is still a human being... worth of compassion. You always have to start at the bottom’ (2017).

This interview made me question my polarised vision of the Spanish civil war history, with a neat line separating the ‘good ones’ (the republicans, with whom I empathised, since my father and his family are republicans and passed their ideology on to me) and the ‘bad ones’ (the fascists and Franco supporters). Acknowledging that my great-grandfather and most of my family on my mother’s side were Franco’s supporters meant that, suddenly, the same fascists I had used as antagonists in my novella were, to some extent, linked to myself. I started thinking that using the term ‘fascist’ as a category to construct enemies in my story had been too simplistic. For instance, at the end of my novella, the fascists are the ones who kill Carmen and Pedro because, back then, I was convinced that is what fascists did when they encountered republicans in the war. Yet, Amanda Palmer’s reflection on separating the human from the terrorist resonated with me since, as a writer, I aspire to create real, three-dimensional characters, far away from the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ cliché. My research on the Spanish Civil War had already proved to me that there were never only two factions against each other, but several political, religious and social groups fighting in complete chaos, as portrayed in Ken Loach’s film *Land and Freedom* (1995). In his excellent book, *The Spanish Labyrinth* (1943), Gerald Brennan dedicated most of the

pages to describe said groups and their rivalries, comparing these divisions in Spain to those in Ireland at the time of independence and its subsequent civil war. That is how it occurred to me that I did not need the fascists to cut the trees in my novella after all. The ‘enemy’ could have been inside Madrid all that time. However, I found myself unwilling to write about a potentially real attack while changing the perpetrator’s affiliation.

Yet, a conversation with my supervisor, Jenn Ashworth, reminded me that I am not a historian, and that all the events narrated in *The Bull’s Betrothed* belong entirely to the realm of fiction. She said to me that the only elements she found offensive in fiction were senseless plot twists and gratuitous gore. I agreed with her and felt she had put into words something I had always felt: as long as the scene has a true reason to belong to the plot, it is never too dark or terrible. Therefore, to silence my concerns, I challenged many aspects of my initial drafts, such as the construction of characters who support fascism, and tried to find a truth in the history I researched in books and in the stories I read or heard from people who lived through the war, such as my grandmother. Eventually, it became clear that by playing fast and loose with historical events like this, my novella could no longer be considered a historical fiction, committed to dramatising the facts and events of more or less accurate history. Instead, I realised, it would have to become something else – an alternative or fictional history, a speculation, or perhaps even an historical dystopia. By queering genre in this way, I became free to change potential real events to serve the theme of the work.

### ***Hystorytelling***

Guillermo del Toro wrote and directed an iconic film about the Spanish civil war, *Pan’s Labyrinth* (2006) that arguably does show that polarised view of the conflict I used to have (the fascists are the antagonists while the republicans are the heroes). During the acceptance speech for the Golden Globe for Best Director in 2018 for his film *The Shape of Water* (2017), he stated, ‘Since childhood, I’ve been faithful to monsters... I have been saved and absolved by them. Monsters, I believe, are patron saints of our blissful imperfection’ (2018). I had definitely portrayed the fascist

soldiers in the final scene of my novella as intrinsically bad, forgetting that monsters<sup>14</sup> can be quite complex figures, who actively resist categorisation. Discovering that I had a personal connection with the Spanish fascists horrified me and enlightened me at the same time. Another war story from my grandmother features my great-grandfather refusing to shoot the republican prisoners and asking his best friend to substitute for him in the firing squad. This seems to suggest that my great-grandfather could separate the human from the terrorist acts that were committed during wartime. Remembering this, encouraged me to re-write history and change sides. Instead of having a group of faceless fascists breaking into the Institución Libre de Enseñanza and terrorising my main characters, I decided the perpetrators of the violence would be other characters readers were familiar with, this is, teachers from the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, led by Professor Yebra, my fictional principal of the school, who had been mentioned throughout the novella as Pedro's friend and mentor<sup>15</sup>.

As a student, I was always told that the recording and study of history exists to teach us about the human condition and warn us from the mistakes we have committed in the past. Byatt states that, 'recent years have seen much discussion of the idea that history is fiction,... and that all narratives are partial and intrinsically biased' (2000, p. 99). I came to this conclusion myself, since the more I researched the Spanish Civil War, the more I realised that what I had learned in school about it was completely different to what my parents had learned about it (both of them went to school during the dictatorship, a time when the republican faction was demonised) or to what Gerald Brennan understood by looking at the Spanish conflict from an outsider's point of view. George Orwell, who travelled to Spain during wartime as a journalist, wrote:

During the Spanish civil war I found myself feeling very strongly that a true history of this war never would or could be written. Accurate figures, objective accounts of what

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<sup>14</sup> As discussed in previous chapters, in the context of my work the monster is as a hybrid figure (Palmer, 2016, p. 119) and ultimately positive, whereas inhuman characters are those who have lost all sense of empathy.

<sup>15</sup> I thought this would be believable since the extreme situations of the war triggered extreme reactions in all kinds of people. My grandmother remembers that when the planes started dropping bombs on Zaragoza, a neighbour came out to the streets cheering for the pilots, because she was a communist and could finally say so.

was happening, simply did not exist... if Franco or anyone at all resembling him remains in power, the history of the war will consist quite largely of “facts” which millions of people now living know to be lies... So for practical purposes the lie will have become truth. (1944)

This quote resonated with me, especially in these times of the so-called post-truth politics. Hence, I decided that the best I could do with my storytelling, in response to the current events as well as to Spain’s bloody past, was to avoid the polarised perception of heroes and enemies, and *The Death of the Trees* was my attempt at doing precisely that. That is why some of the teachers – supporters of the republican cause – go mad and destroy the garden to create barricades and protect Madrid from the fascist troops. Pedro’s fascist friends, on the other hand, are the ones who allow him and his family to cross the fascist lines so they can escape to the Netherlands. To me, it was important to show violence coming from all kinds of characters so, at the end, when General Márquez, a soldier from the fascist faction, murders Carmen and Pedro, readers can see that this is the inhuman act of a damaged individual, and not something intrinsic to the fascist category. As Del Toro defends, I too believe that ‘monsters are patrons of our blissful imperfection’; condemning them blindly only makes us less human.

## **Present**

### ***Storm Desmond***

In December 2015, Storm Desmond hit Lancaster. The power station got flooded – since it was conveniently placed next to a river – and the town sank into darkness for three consecutive days.

When I started writing my novella *Case File 477* on October 2015, I wanted to explore the idea of a futuristic Irish Catholic theocracy. My plot started with one line: ‘The angry citizens of Neo Dublin join forces to place a bomb in the New Trinity College to take down the government’. At the time, I wished to focus on a group of outcasts that would come together to do something terrible – believing it was their only hope. For the sake of plausibility, I had to place the story in the future, and that is why I chose the science-fiction genre. Defining science-fiction is a complicated task,

since ‘...SF is a protean genre... always in flux; it is contested ground, subject to revisions and rewritings and appropriations, and that,... is its strength’ ( Baker, 2014, p. 2) but I agree with Brian Baker that the main features of this genre are

...its formal apparatus, its capacity for critique, its potential as a marginal cultural production to act as a form of cryptogram, its potential to imagine “the Other of what is”, or even as a form of escape and entertainment, express specific political, ethical and literary conceptualisations of the genre. (2014, p. 9)

Initially, I didn’t feel very confident in writing science-fiction. Some of my preferred books in this genre were *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K Le Guin (1974) or Ted Chiang’s collection *Stories of your life and others* (2002). These books interlaced plot with physics and characters with mathematical theories I could barely understand. As my knowledge in science is quite limited, I wondered if I could create a truly science-fiction novella. Hence, my first instinct was to base the world-building of *Case File 477* on something I was familiar with. And that was the rain.

Moving countries from Spain to the UK meant that scenery gained more importance in my writing as I found the landscape different and fascinating. The first novella I wrote in English, *McTavish Manor*, is set in the Highlands, and the old, arid mountains are an important presence in the story, affecting the mood and even sanity of the characters. In *Case File 477*, I focused on the idea of rain and darkness, the two things I find most challenging about living in the northwest of England. Inspired by José Saramago’s novel *The Stone Raft* (1986) – which deals with the surreal scenario of the Iberian peninsula breaking off from Europe and floating adrift in the Atlantic Ocean – I devised a futuristic world of never-ending rains, where Ireland has sunk and Irish people have invaded what is left of the Iberian Peninsula. Thus, I, like Le Guin, believe in a fluid definition of the term ‘science-fiction’ as ‘speculative fiction about things that could really happen’ (Le Guin, cited in Atwood, 2011, p. 6).

When I was writing the first draft, Storm Desmond descended over Lancaster. It was the grandiose finale after a month of never-ending rains (November). On the night the power went off, I walked back home, crossing the bridge and looking down the water

– I lived very close to the river Conder. I was very surprised to see that the calm, greenish stream had turned into a brown torrent of furious – that was the first adjective that came to my mind – water.

When I woke up next morning, lights and heating didn't work. I couldn't use my phone or the internet to see what was going on. All the shops, restaurants and supermarkets were closed. There were no buses, the traffic lights were not working, and no trains passed by the station. To contact others, you had to walk to where they lived, or queue to use public phones (which I hadn't even realised existed, because I never had to use them). I shared a frozen mango cake with a few friends that afternoon, while watching how my freezer defrosted and most of the food went to waste. At night, we all gathered with candles around the radio to listen to the only station we could tune into.

The landscape had changed. There were lakes instead of fields. The architecture of the town had been altered since water was so high that it reached the first, second and even third floor of several buildings. Instead of cars, rafts moved around, silently.

After those three days, the army brought electric generators to Lancaster to supply the power while the station was being fixed. I went back to writing my science-fiction novella about a flooded world, but it felt strange. I was not writing about an imagined place anymore, but about a situation that felt quite close to my recent personal experiences. I was not the only one inspired by Storm Desmond. In 2017, northwest-based author Sarah McDonal-Hughes wrote the play *Blackout*. As writer Scarlett Thomas states, 'Fiction... has a metaphorical relationship with reality... narrative... is a form of philosophical thought experiment where we work out how we feel about things' (2012, p. 49). Thomas also says, 'Remember to consider what the emotional truth of any situation is likely to be for you... what would the characters *really* feel, and what would they *really* do?' (p. 210). Storm Desmond helped me write about a flooded city and its inhabitants, which I had initially portrayed as mild, almost comical. It led me to reconsider the relationship between my characters and the threatening landscape they are forced to co-exist with. I rewrote many of the descriptions of Neo-Dublin that Kerry – my main character – gives to

readers. I decided he would always look at the black waters with suspicion and, sometimes, he would be angry at the intensity of the rain. According to Ian Martin, who wrote an article for *The Guardian* about Storm Desmond in Lancaster, the weather is ‘not to be trusted’ and nothing can control it, not even the ones in power: ‘That’s when government attempts to appear to be in charge of the weather were mocked for the hubristic footling bollocks they truly were’ (2015). Thus, I put Neo Dublin’s inhabitants in a constant fight against the landscape and themselves. I understood that, because of this precariousness, many would feel let down by their government, in the same way people in Lancashire felt completely hopeless seeing their houses destroyed by the water, while politicians ‘...just visit the scene, survey the aftermath, furrow their brows, clamp their back teeth together, piss off’ (Martin, 2015). This is how I realised that I was writing not only a science-fiction novella, but also a dystopia.

### ***Brexit***

Initially, I had no idea of what would happen in *Case File 477* once Kerry had placed the bomb in the New Trinity College. The plot was all about him being given this ‘mission’ by Sister Ciarana and then overcoming several obstacles before accomplishing it. The story could have ended there, but I was worried this would be unsatisfactory for readers.

In 2015, there was much in the news about refugees coming to Europe in boats, escaping from war, misery, hunger – news that would arguably trigger Brexit in the year to come. Such images were not new to me. I grew up watching very similar ones on TV: African people arriving in Spain by boats, being discovered by the Spanish authorities and then repatriated to their countries.

When I started working on my ending, I decided that the only realistic idea in a flooded world was that Kerry would escape in a raft. I immediately connected that with the images I just mentioned. I agree with scholar Andrew Tate that dystopian fiction should be used to engage with the present, since ‘one of the problems with understanding speculative fiction primarily as future orientated, “dystopian” speculations about what might occur somewhere down the line is that it can let us off

the hook and evades contemporary political questions' (2017, p. 7). Besides, these images have some Biblical resonances since they come back to Noah and his ark. When God decided to punish the Earth with unbearable horrors, Noah didn't stay at home to drown, but ran away with his family on a boat looking for a fresh start (The Bible, Genesis. 8:15). I think Noah was himself a refugee, but nobody argues that he did the wrong thing by attempting to escape tragedy.

In June 2016, Brexit happened. I had followed the debate in the news but from a distance – the same way, I must admit, I had read about refugees. It was upsetting, so I tried to avoid it. Then, I woke up one morning and saw in the news that the UK had voted out. Everyone was asking what would happen with the European immigrants. After a few hours, it hit me. I was one of those immigrants. I went to work. We had an online playlist where we could upload any track we wanted to hear in the office. That day, *God Save the Queen* played many times and I realised I felt very uncomfortable. Dystopia as a genre is linked with that sense of uneasiness and loss; scholar Eric S. Rabkin calls it '... the monstrous dystopia (*bad place*)...' (1983, p. 1);

Brexit, like Storm Desmond, was an abrupt event that completely changed my writing of *Case File 477*. Some of the feedback I received at the start was that Kerry seemed too violent and mean to those around him. For example, the book opens with him bullying his step-sister. I used to think that violence was an inherent quality of Kerry's character. He was, then, very similar to Alex from *A Clockwork Orange*: aggressive and reckless. However, after Brexit, I began to deal with anger and fear myself. I obsessed about the cars parked near my house: some of them had the European Union flag on the number plate scratched or changed to the English flag. On the train, I looked at people and wondered if they had voted in or out. Were they looking at me, with my curly hair and dark eyes, hoping I went back to my country? The landscape around me, black hills, cloudy skies and grey houses, became unwelcoming. The European Union had meant that I had always felt as comfortable in England as in my own country. I didn't even have to bring my passport to enter or leave the UK. But this was about to change, and the uncertainty made me feel like a caged animal. Dystopia proved to be the best way to challenge this rejection of

fluidity and movement since this genre is the contrary of utopia which, according to scholar Krishan Kumar, has much to do with repression and homogeneity, ‘Fascism is a utopia. So too is Communism in its Soviet form. They are utopian, it is argued, precisely in their worst aspects, in their belief that they have discovered the secret of history and that, armed with this discovery, they are in a position to rule and regulate society totally, in all its aspects’ (1993, p. 65).

Besides, going through all this myself allowed me to empathise with Kerry in a powerful way and look at him from a compassionate perspective. According to Chekhov, this is one of the key aspects any author should consider before creating (2004, p. 269). Moreover, Scarlett Thomas suggests ‘we might try not just to love all our characters, but perhaps to love them all the same amount. Even if this is too hard for us, it’s certainly a liberating experience’ (2012, p. 244). Because of this, I added scenes in the novella to show that Kerry can also be affectionate with his older sister and that he worries about being liked by Sceilig, the school boy he is attracted to.

Brexit made me realise that I was not that different from the refugees or Noah; after all, I had also left my homeland looking for a better future. I had always perceived the word ‘immigrant’ negatively – despite being an immigrant myself. Growing up in Spain, I had felt suspicious of the Moroccan immigrants, the Ecuadorian, and the Romanian because my family complained about them overloading the healthcare system, or taking too many jobs from the Spanish. Yet, in Lancaster, I invited a good friend for lunch – who happens to be English and the daughter of immigrants – and she assured me that Brexit was not as bad after all, because it would guarantee that, finally, jobs would go to British people first, instead of immigrants. I don’t know if she realised I was one of those immigrants too, and that we were competing for the same kind of jobs, since we both work in academia.

I became especially interested in this contradiction (immigrants rejecting other immigrants) and how discrimination seems to be an inherent part of nationalism and, perhaps, being human. Dystopian author Naomi Alderman states that ‘the conclusion I’ve come to through extensive speculative fiction voyaging is that the best we can hope for, probably, is to create a society that tries hard not to leave people out. And to be vigilantly alert to the people we are leaving out, whoever they are. To

listen' (Alderman, 2017). Thus, I decided to use dystopia to make my reader think about their present and who are the ones they are leaving out. I realised that, in my writing, I had sympathised with the Spanish characters, because they were the conquered ones, whereas I was leaving out the Irish characters and making them flat and close to cliché. This was the case with Kerry's Irish father, who I presented as an extremely religious man, strict and abusive. I decided to change this and gave him some likeable features such as always being very attentive with his children and doing anything to help them. I also decided that Íscar, a secondary character that I considered discarding, would be of Japanese descent and, therefore, all the Spanish characters would be suspicious of him in the same way the Irish are suspicious of the Spanish. I tried not to think of my characters as 'Spanish', 'Irish' or 'Japanese' and stopped myself (as well as I could) from allowing these categories to shape their personalities. Nationalism can be dangerous when it separates different 'groups', preventing us from seeing the human behind the category, both in life and when we're writing characters.

### ***The Catalan Referendum***

Catalonia is an autonomous community from Spain, and has fought to be an independent country since 1922. In October 2017, the Catalan government organised an independence referendum which, according to the Spanish constitution, was illegal. The day of the referendum, the Spanish government sent special police units to prevent people from voting. There were fights in the streets between the civilians and the armed police. When I saw the images in the media, my heart sunk. My father is from Valencia, a region near Catalonia that would be considered part of these 'Catalan Countries' if independence was to happen. I wanted to call my pro-independence friends and family who live in Barcelona to ask them if they were all right. But I couldn't do it. I felt too ashamed. A part of me believed that being born in Madrid held me somehow accountable for the questionable acts of the Spanish government.

This made me understand why, sometimes, British people come to me and apologise because of Brexit. I had always refused to take their apologies – it was obviously not their fault. But I've realised now that calling myself 'Spanish' can

create a barrier (of shame, fear and suspicion) between me and my Catalan family; the same happens between me and British people. I have started despising the term ‘Spanish’ because I find it constraining both inside and outside my own country. As Gary Budden says:

The evils of nationalism and corrupted ideas of belonging to ‘the land’ are very much with us now... We’re living in an age of mass extinction and climate collapse. We hear talk of those who don’t belong, who aren’t native, aliens – humans like you and me dehumanised when humanity is the thing we all desperately need right now. And it might be a small thing seemingly in the face of all that, but the books we write, and the books we read (along with the music we listen to and the films we watch), are important in how we understand these issues, and therefore understand ourselves. (2017a)

The Catalan Referendum also made me reflect on why I was writing a science-fiction dystopia. Initially, all I wanted to do was to tell a story about a catholic theocracy in a flooded world. Two years into the process, the last thing I was thinking of was fiction. Author M. R. Carey says that the dystopian genre, ‘gives us a split focus, on “the hollow left behind” and on the living who now have to reach a new accommodation with a new reality. That’s a crucial and complicated part of being human, and we need all the help we can get’ (2018). I definitely felt I had to accommodate to a new reality: the palpable consequences of Climate Change – that I experienced in Storm Desmond –, Brexit, the Spanish government leaning dangerously towards a violent fascism reminiscent of the Franco days. Equally, my characters in *Case File 477* struggle with nationalism and a regime based on oppression while living in a world that is sinking.

Scholar Andrew Milner argues that:

Dystopia goes in and out of fashion, but it was almost certainly at its most influential in Europe during the first half of the 20th century – that is, in a time and place in which there were two dreadful wars, the Great Depression, Stalinism and Fascism. In short, a time and place with much to be warned against. If dystopia has once again become fashionable in film and literature, it’s almost certainly because we too now have much to be warned against. (Milner, 2012)

Contrary to what Milner suggests, I do not want to use my science-fiction dystopia to warn others. After realising that my science-fiction novella was mutating into a dystopia, I decided that I had to queer this genre to explore the times we are living in, when landscape and ideas of nation and belonging are constantly transforming. After all, as Margaret Atwood states, ‘in science fiction it’s always about now. What else could it be about? There is no future. There are many possibilities, but we do not know which one we are going to have’ (2018).

In the past, I refused to mix politics or contemporary issues with my writing. I was naïve. I didn’t acknowledge that art never happens in a vacuum and that many authors before me have used their writing to ‘[offer] alternatives to the dominant narratives of their given place and time’ (Malla, 2017). One could argue that writing stories instead of acting to create change can be a lazy alternative. As Julio Cortázar puts it, ‘...all essentially intellectual activity might seem somewhat derisory and even gratuitous, as if the undertaking of a literary or artistic work entailed a constant battle against a sense, a suspicion, that it is a luxury, an excess, a way of avoiding a more immediate and concrete responsibility. It isn’t, in fact it is exactly the opposite (2017).’

To me, Writing *Case File 477* ended up being an act of subversion, and I felt it was the best I could do to protest and instigate change. In my novella, there are abrupt changes in the weather and the land, yet characters are so busy worrying about fixed ideas of nation and race they don’t perceive this as a chance to reinvent themselves but as doom. My story can be categorised as a science-fiction dystopia – it definitely started like that – but it is also a piece about the now.

### **Future**

When I was planning my three novellas, my initial idea was to explore the connections between Ireland and Spain throughout past (*The Book of Cow*), present (*The Bull’s Betrothed*) and future (*Case File 477*). I wanted to link them by using the character of Saint Ciarán, who embarks on a journey to explore the three states of the Catholic faith: the finding of faith, doubt and apostasy. I felt that writing a triptych was another way of queering religion in my work.

However, two years into the project, I started thinking about the actual order of the novellas since this would impact the way readers would receive *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*. I envisioned two options: the first one was to respect the logical order of past, present and future. The second one, was to cut the novellas in halves and mix them in two sets of triptychs, which is something similar to what David Mitchell has done in several of his composite novels, including *Cloud Atlas* (2004), in which different characters, times and places are combined to create a greater story arc. Mitchell, who has been a great influence on my writing, calls this the ‘artist’s inner architecture’ which he defines as ‘the thematic architectural blue-print underlying the novel that not all readers will spot, but nonetheless keeps the whole book up’ (2005). I, like him, aspire to challenge my readers and welcome them as agents in the construction of my stories rather than mere passive receptors. My fascination with the experimentation of language and format started at the time I began to write in English instead of Spanish, with my novella *McTavish Manor*, and continued in *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*, but finding the balance in said experimentation has always been difficult. Besides, my three novellas were already quite experimental in terms of format and language. *Case File 477* is written in an invented patois; *The Bull’s Betrothed* has five different points of view and *The Book of Cow* imitates the style of an ancient Irish legend. I worried that by dividing them and mixing them together I would be creating a piece too difficult for readers to assimilate and – more importantly – enjoy.

While mulling over the arrangement of my novellas, I realised that I had written them in an inverse order, this is, I started with *Case File 477* and finished with *The Book of Cow*. I found that this going from the future to the past mirrored my own journey as a writer that I have partially discussed in the previous sections of this essay. I wrote *Case File 477* during 2015 and 2016, and this coincided with a major alteration in my life. Not only I had decided to stop writing in Spanish and focus on English (by pursuing a PhD in creative writing) but what I had always taken for granted – climate, my freedom to live in the UK, my ability to exist as a queer, feminist, migrant human – started being questioned, even condemned. This triggered

in me an acute powerlessness and I felt caged while trying to express myself creatively in a language that I deeply loved but – like my reality – I could not control.

It was very difficult for me to think about the future then, so I decided to look back at the past instead. Thus, I spent much of 2017 researching into the Spanish Civil War and reading books that proved to be key to writing *The Bull's Betrothed*, such as *The Spanish Labyrinth* (1946), *In Place of Splendor* (De la Mora, 1940), *Recuerdos de una mujer de la generación del 98* (Baroja, 1998) and *María de Maeztu Whitney* (Lastagaray Rosales, 2015). I also had many illuminating conversations with my friend Ana Rosa Domínguez, whose father fought and survived the Siege of Madrid in 1936 that I depict at the end of *The Bull's Betrothed*. The stories she told me inspired characters such as the young Irish teenager from the International Brigades that Ciarán encounters inside the Prado Museum during the bombing<sup>16</sup>. George Green also helped me with the writing of this novella, as we were both writing stories about the Spanish Civil War at the time. As he is Irish and I am Spanish, we often found and discussed many similarities between our countries of birth, especially in terms of politics and social unrest at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Ireland and Spain struggled with civil wars and starvation.

Looking at the past made me aware of the similarities between the situation in Europe during the thirties and the issues we face today – nationalism, economic crisis and the rise of fascist politics. This did not scare me; on the contrary, it gave me some understanding and challenged some of my core beliefs. For the first time as a writer, I infused my art with politics, directly encouraged by English authors such as Salena Godden, Coco Khan and Gary Budden, who blatantly confront ideas around nationalism, fascism, climate change and gender in their writing.

Author Tim Parks suggests that conflicts such as Brexit may boost writers' imagination because '...while life is dangerous and full of strife, art unashamedly transforms it into something engaging and even charming: We may not know how to live, but we certainly know how to talk about it' (2016). Although I would never call

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<sup>16</sup> Ana Rosa mentioned that the International Brigades were full of people with absolutely no military experience who, once they arrived to Spain, were never properly trained. This is why, after the first attacks, many of them had stomach wounds, which proved they didn't even know how to take cover or protect themselves from the shooting of the enemy. This is exactly the case of my teenage soldier, dying from a stomach wound in Ciarán's arms.

my writing ‘charming’ – as I am always more interested in challenging (and even shocking) readers – I have to admit that well into 2017, I was full of new ideas and inspiration. This is when I started writing the final draft of *The Book of Cow*. I decided to make it the myth of origin for the universe I was creating in *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*. I included recurrent themes from the other two novellas such as Climate Change, questions about race, the boundaries between animals and humans and the idea of transcending gender – that I tackled by making my main character, Chiaráin, experience rebirth as both male and female, several times throughout the plot. In *The Book of Cow* I also explored the idea of nations being an imagined concept – Queen Eanna and the warrior Diarmait have very different views on what ‘Ireland’ is – and humans being quintessentially migrant – Chiaráin and his sister travel to Ireland from the Iberian peninsula, the same way the Fir Bolg women did before them.

To me, the main incentive to arrange the novellas in an inverse chronological order was the ability to show to readers that history is cyclical and does not have a defined set of heroes and antagonists, beginnings and ends. Instead, I personally see it as a struggle, a place where cultures, genders and ideas collide, mix and evolve.

However, on the final stages of my PhD, when I was polishing the final draft of *The Three Lives of Saint Ciarán*, I found myself hesitant about using *Case File 477* as the opening novella in my trilogy. I was afraid that its bleakness and challenging language would discourage readers. An illuminating conversation with Jenn Ashworth about this issue completely changed the way I saw the order of my novellas. She made me realise that arranging them forwards or backwards would alter the narrative question I was asking to readers. Backwards, as I planned to have them, suggested ‘how did Ciarán reach this point?’ whereas forwards was ‘who will Ciarán become next?’ Ashworth thought the second question was slightly more powerful. After some deliberation, I ended up agreeing with her. As much as I believe that the past can be an excellent teacher – for example, reading *The Spanish Labyrinth* influenced how I understand ‘Spanishness’ today – I do not want my reader to focus solely on how or why my characters have reached that certain state. I find this would imply that everything is already written, and as such, static. My intention is to create a story that

‘reinvents itself as it goes along’ and in which ‘each stage of development is one of mutation from mutation, outgrowth from outgrowth’ (Litt, 2016, p. 5).

Besides, arranging them in chronological order also made sense in the context of queer theology and the Holy Trinity composed by the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. In the first novella, I made Chiaráin discover faith; in the second novella I decided he will be incarnated in the body of Ciarán, and in the third novella I consciously moved from the figure of Ciarán to the followers of this gender-fluid saint.

### **Conclusion**

Queering genre turned out to be as liberating as queering gender and language. Ursula K Le Guin refused to be called a ‘science-fiction writer’, alleging, ‘Don’t shove me into your damn pigeonhole, where I don’t fit, because I’m all over’ (Le Guin, 2013). Equally, I do not wish my novellas to be shoved into a unique genre. They are all informed by a historical fiction that is also ‘fantastic’ and a ‘rewriting of official history’ ( Byatt, 2000, p.93). They also exhibit some elements of science-fiction and dystopia that I am using to explore the ‘other’ and create hypothetical worlds that ask questions about this present. Ultimately, if there is any kind of constant in my fiction, it is the element of the weird. Like writer Gary Budden says:

the world is fucking weird... [it] appears to resemble a tasteless, surreal and ill-thought joke. Brexit, Trump, Nazis, ISIS, climate collapse, Love Island and The Bake Off. It’s a weird and frightening world that seems to be untethered from any logic. What better way to address this in fiction than by employing the weird? Weird fiction is reportage from the real world of our psyches.’ (Budden, 2017b)



### **Riding the bull and milking him**

I queered my writing to make it hybrid and, by extension, make my reader hybrid, too. I found that speculative fiction was the genre that, in its fluidity, accommodated my characters and all the stories I wanted to tell. This said, I must admit that trying to categorise my writing – when working on this essay, or considering how to sell my novel to potential agents and publishers – has always been a source of frustration. That is why I resonate with Toby Litt’s idea of *headfuck fiction* as a genre that doesn’t shy away from mutation and fluidity but rather welcomes them.

In fact, I would like to propose a sub-category of speculative fiction called ‘monstrous fiction’ whose liminal space is ideal to explore empathy. In November 2018, three French writers, Aurélien Delsaux, Sophie Divry and Denis Michelis, published a manifesto titled *Monstrous Times Call for Monstrous Fiction*. They said, ‘...we look for new images, a shocking new syntax. We want to continue this fight with and against language. This struggle is our way of telling reality... we want to write what has not yet been written, what is waiting to be understood’ (2018). This comes back to the idea of mutation embodied as a perpetual search for new ways of using language and characters to engage with a turbulent reality that is far from static. I see monstrous fiction as a genre that encourages queerness and hybridity and openly embraces the weird. It recasts the concept of the monster so that it stops being ‘the other’ and represents instead that part of the human soul – often repressed – that aches for mutation.

Through my research, I have come across books that I would categorise as monstrous fiction. *The Ballad of Lee Cotton*, by Christopher Wilson (2006), is an example. In this story, the main character starts as a white child born into a black family in Mississippi. After a car accident, his genitals are completely destroyed and a shady doctor decides that the only way to ‘fix’ them is to reconstruct them as female. That is how Lee becomes a white woman. Later in the book, she suffers from a rare skin disease that makes her black. At the end of the story, she has started to grow wings, just like an angel. Despite the bizarreness of the plot – or shall I say precisely because of that – *The Ballad of Lee Cotton* effectively challenges ideas around gender, the racial divide in the USA, the rise of feminism and pornography, war, mental

health and Christianity. It also shows that stories can have mutating plots, characters and genres – *The Ballad of Lee Cotton* is, among many other things, a romance, a coming-of-age and a ghost story.

The ultimate aim of monstrous fiction is to shock readers, to challenge their beliefs and invite them to co-create ways of destroying history cycles and transcend ideas of class, race, culture and gender. Whereas I know that the mutability of this genre may confuse my reader at first, I hope it also shows them that there is enough space in my writing for them to move, flow, ask – and perhaps answer – their own questions. Referring to Brexit, journalist Fintan O’Toole states that ‘In the imperial imagination, there are only two states: dominant and submissive, colony and colonised. This dualism lingers. If England is not an imperial power, it must be the only other thing it can be: a colony’ (2018). I firmly believe that fiction can help us break from the cage of dual thinking and embrace mutation to finish the destructive history cycles that I mentioned before.

All in all, I feel that the role of fiction is to look beyond our current reality by means of the imagination. As Junot Díaz says ‘As a writer, I always feel like I’m talking very intimately to my reader and I tend to assume my reader has a lot of my same knowledge. But of course translation is what writers do, from another perspective. We transmute the world into fiction’ (2016). Ultimately, what I expect my reader to take with them is that nothing is set in stone and that the dangers of purity are its inability to keep mutating and adapting. To create, we all need to be hybrids.

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