



“From Catastrophe to Metamorphosis: the Mythical Power of Seascapes in Five Contemporary Irish Short Stories”.

Marie Mianowski

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Name: Marie Mianowski

Title: Dr (Maître de Conférences)

Affiliation:

CRINI/ Département d'anglais
Université de Nantes
Chemin de la Censive du Tertre
BP81227
44312 Nantes cedex 3
France
marie.mianowski@univ-nantes.fr

Title: From catastrophe to metamorphosis: the mythical power of seascapes in five contemporary Irish short stories.

Keywords: sea, place, memory, landscape, myth, loss, metamorphosis, catastrophe, ruin, flood.

Abstract:

This essay focuses on the paradoxical role of seascapes in five contemporary Irish short stories published between 2010 and 2013: “Festus” by Gerard Donovan, “Fjord of Killary” by Kevin Barry, “A Different Country” by Danielle McLaughlin, “Soft Rain” by Trisha McKinney and “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave behind” by Billy O’Callaghan. While questioning what anthropologist Tim Ingold coins as the act of “sea-ing” the land, this essay also examines Jeff Malpas’ concepts of openness and emergence as defined in an article on philosophical topography and relational geography. I argue that it is perhaps no coincidence if the seaside landscapes described in the five short stories studied depict place as always bounded, and yet “always open and dynamic.” (Malpas 2012, 236) The liminal nature of seascapes offers a unique perspective on landscapes, and in fact contributes to reconfiguring the concepts of space and place. Set in the contemporary context of post Celtic Tiger Ireland, the five stories selected suggest how the representations of the recession in contemporary Ireland can be reassessed within the broader representations of the myths of loss, catastrophe and regeneration. The essay will examine the elliptical and implicit use of

language and explore and how it actually performs the highly transformative and mythical power of seascape.

The short stories studied in this essay dwell on the links between the passing of time and the specificity of seascapes, their geological permanence as well as the mythical transforming power of the ocean. Space and place appear in their complex relationship as the filter through which anthropological, environmental and economical changes, as well as catastrophes, are perceived and assessed. “A Different Country” by Danielle McLaughlin, “Soft Rain” by Trisha McKinney and “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave behind” by Billy O’Callaghan were among the six shortlisted stories for the Writing.ie Short Story of the Year 2013 Award. Trisha McKinney’s “Soft Rain” was published online for the Writing.ie 2013 competition, while “A Different Country” appeared in the 2013-2014 Winter edition of *The Stinging Fly* and was included in Danielle McLaughlin’s first collection of short stories, published in 2016. “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave behind” by Billy O’Callaghan is the eponymous title of a collection of stories published by New Island in 2013. Published several years into the recession, all three depict seascapes in a context where change and passing time are questioned in relation to contemporary issues. I have added “Festus” by Gerard Donovan, published in Joseph O’Connor’s 2011 anthology *New Irish Short Stories*, and “Fjord of Killary” by Kevin Barry, which was included in the author’s 2013 collection *Dark Lies the Island* because they share a sense of imminent catastrophe, palpable in the seascapes at the heart of their narratives. With a strong emphasis on the permanence of nature, all five short stories can also be read as suggesting what Tim Ingold coins as the act of “sea-ing” the land: “In sea-ing the land, [...] it is the solidity of the ground itself that is thrown into doubt. That it is also restless, in ceaseless motion and change.” (Ingold 2011, 131) For, to quote Edward S. Casey in a chapter entitled “The Edge of Landscape:” “how are we to think

of the edge of a given landscape or seascape? Assuming it exists – something we cannot take for granted – is it a limit, a perimeter, a periphery? What is it, and how are we to think of it?” (Casey 2011, 1) The elliptical and denotative use of language in the stories actually performs the highly transformative and mythical powers of the sea, while revealing the paradoxes of seascapes and inviting the reader to re-evaluate the concept of place. In the context of Tim Robinson’s work, the stories seem to reflect how a mere location may be elevated to the status of place (Robinson 1997, 100) and the seascapes can lead us to re-examine the myths of permanence, continuity and metamorphosis in the way they strive to give environmental hazards adequate representation. Seascapes can also lead us to re-examine the myths of permanence, continuity and metamorphosis as the stories strive to give environmental hazards adequate representation. The stories highlight the paradoxes of the permanence of seascapes in which home appears as a central place of anchorage, defined by boundedness and absence of change. And yet home is also the place from which complex and shifting perspectives emerge. In fact, the dichotomies inherent to seascapes are sources of tensions between two conceptions of place. The narratives attempt to countervail the myth of permanence by questioning the bounded nature of place. Finally, in so far as the “consciousness of loss,” (Lloyd 2008, 5) which Lloyd describes as saturating Irish history since the time of the Famine, could also be understood as a valid statement for our times, to what extent do the seascapes in those short stories offer possibilities of metamorphosis and regeneration to imagine the future?

All five short stories seem to hint that seascapes equate permanence and stability and are somehow immune to change. They offer a stable framework in terms of geographical landmarks while at the same time questioning the very notion of framing. They also echo recent environmental scandals and ecological debates, while questioning traditional lifestyles,

as for example the reference to seal hunting in “A Different Country.” In fact, the power of the non-human constituents of the landscape is emphasized in all stories. For example, at the beginning of “Soft Rain,” the landscape is described as almost unfit for human beings, “unsafe for bathing” (McKinney 2013, 1) while the seascape appears almost sacred, as the trees have a “presence,” “growing on rocky outcrops – row after row bent in the same direction as if worshipping someone.” (McKinney 2013, 1) The seascape seems to have imposed its own sacred order on the human beings that inhabit it, illustrating another aspect of Lloyd’s definition of myth as

the trace of the domination of humans by nature – a domination that, one might say, becomes increasingly internalized as psychic: at once the terror of superstition and the terror produced when forces relegated to the unconscious are unleashed in violence. (Lloyd 2008, 18)

The trace of nature’s domination of humans is even more powerful in the two short stories in which geographical locations are not identified: “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind” and “Festus,” which achieves a more powerful universal resonance precisely because of its indeterminate setting. In all five stories, the representations of seascape partake of myth, and the sea and the seashore appear as realms to which newcomers are forever foreigners. The sea world is related to obscure mythical forces that Alain Corbin describes as “that unruly dark side of the world which was an abode of monsters stirred up by diabolical powers, [and] emerges as one of the persistent figures of madness.” (Corbin 1994, 7)

In “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind” the geological permanence of the materials constituting the seascape is central: “rock and ocean and sky, elements that keep a count in aeons rather than years.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 219) Even though there is no description of the sea, its ebb and flow movement seems to have permeated both the writing and the minds of the characters. As the estranged narrator comes back to the island where his

young son lives, the rhythm of the narrative alternates between his observations of the present moment and his memories of the past, or more subtly even, as suggested by the title of the story itself, between one proposition and another very similar one. The ocean itself is evoked in the way the main character, seeing his son's features, recalls his beloved. As he looks at his son, he sees the ocean as he remembers it in her eyes: "he has her eyes, her shade of green that is nearly grey, a peculiarly coastal shade of eye, mirroring the sea (...) hiding its greater depths." (O'Callaghan 2013, 221)

Against this sense of permanence and geological time, seascapes also evoke a more versatile, subterranean perception of time. The cycle of ebb and flow, as well as the changing light, illustrate movement and change. Amid the mythical seascape, a complex sense of home emerges, defined by habits and memories of the past. And yet, it is very soon counterbalanced by a call to leave and see the world outside. Even the writing seems permeated by a subterranean force undermining the myth of permanence and counterbalancing the resistance to change ingrained in the characters. David Lloyd opens *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* by bluntly emphasizing the same contradiction: "That the past is another country is an all too often cited dictum. Just as commonly held, if less often stated so baldly, is the belief that another country is the past." (Lloyd 2008, 1) Lloyd insists on the necessary disjunction between the past and its spatial representations and between specific spaces and their relations to time, both past and present. While all five stories reflect the tendency of viewing seascapes as fixed spaces, unscathed by modernity and the catastrophes of our times, the narratives belie the very notion that seascapes embody the past. On the contrary, numerous elements emphasize change and movement. To the bounded and immobile experience of place there corresponds an urge to leave and see the world outside, just as Jeff Malpas writes of the intricacies of space and place, and bounded place extending into openness. (Malpas 2011,

232) As an illustration of this, the stories display a subterranean force undermining the myth of permanence and counterweighing the resistance to change manifested by the characters.

Geographer Doreen Massey describes the view of place as bounded as “a conceptualization of place which rests in part on the view of space as stasis.” (Massey 2013, 5) To her, such places are “necessarily sites of nostalgia, of the opting-out from Progress and History,” (Massey 2013, 5) because place is “open and porous.” (Massey 2013, 5) In his paper “Putting Space in Place,” (Malpas 2012, 226-242) Jeff Malpas criticizes Doreen Massey and other geographers vehemently, reproaching them their lack of rigour and accusing them of defining spatialities rather than space itself. Doreen Massey does stress that place, time and space are intimately connected. But in the light of Jeff Malpas’ conceptualization of space and place, I argue that in the short stories under study the characters resist the on-going pull towards the extendedness of space in expressing their attachment to the belief that home equates fixity and enclosure. It is also visible in their claim that present memories are faithful to the past. And yet, as if contradicting their characters, the narrators seem to force into their narratives the ineluctability of passing time in the guise of changing light, decay and catastrophe. The various ways in which views are framed in the stories reveal the crucial role of boundaries and thresholds in the narratives, as in-between spaces which question the very nature of boundaries as spaces of transition: in-between the sea and the land, in-between times of life, in-between moments or states of being.

If Henry Martin in “Soft Rain” seems anchored in his native home, “waking up in the same bed he’s slept in since he was a child” (McKinney 2013, 1), he also dreams of the day he can leave, as “the world for him is a time and a place somewhere else, and he longs to step into it.” (McKinney 2013, 4) The narrative subtly shows how he is torn between the faithfulness to his dead mother and dying father, and his urge to break free from the routine of

his life and walk away. But as Henry Martin at last leaves for “a place somewhere else”, his path remains vague, with no indication given of the place he might be going to, his destination as open ended as the last words of the story: “the house he walks away from.” (McKinney 2013,6) In “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind”, the exact opposite movement has brought the narrator home, responding to “an urge to come home,” (O’Callaghan 2013, 223) because “this is where he belongs.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 224) In both stories the opposition is very stark between home and the outside world, between the past, the present and the hypothetical future, and the narratives are woven with memories evocating food or light that function as bridges linking past and present. Indeed, food rituals contribute to place attachment as they remind the characters of the past, and sensually anchor them to the intimacies of place. As psychologist Maria Lewicka writes:

“Place attachment has a temporal dimension: it implies continuity of the relationship with the attachment object, connects its present to its past, with the hope that this relationship will continue in the future.” (Lewicka 2014, 51)

Food is one of the ways in which place attachment is manifested in three of the stories, as it turns memories of the past into present emotions and perceptions. The rituals associated with food make the past come alive in the present. The narrator of “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind” insists on this aspect of food: “here on the island, food takes on the qualities of a ritual, another of the many duties to be fulfilled.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 223) In “A Different Country”, the ritual of food is linked to the discovery by Sarah of an entirely different way of life. Memories and shared rituals extend the sense of place between past and present, emphasizing both attachment to place and endowing seascapes with qualities of mutability.

Similarly, the descriptions of light, changing from one moment of the day to the next, shifting from one season to the other, mark the passing of time. But such light changes also

bring about the next moment and the next day, lead to departures, deaths and new births. In “A Different Country” night corresponds to the second part of the story, as Sarah drives Pauline to the maternity ward and picks up Aidan on a beach after his murderous seal-hunt. This event takes place abruptly in the narrative after a typographical blank on the page, and is clearly made to look like a different moment, almost a different country, as if the tide had come in, the flow after the ebb, bringing realization of the baby seals’ deaths but also of the imminent birth of Pauline’s baby. Not only have the changes in the light, from daylight to utter darkness, projected the narrative into the future, but the juxtaposition of death and birth, the violence of natural elements – the waves of Pauline’s delivery contractions – appear as inescapable. They also highlight the domination of natural elements over human beings. In “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind” light clearly shapes the sense of place and home for the narrator, as it indicates passing time and the moment of departure. In the second half of the story, as the main character sits in his father-in-law’s cottage, the feeling of time passing is rendered by the light, growing darker every minute: “the darkness feels tempered and crumbles by degrees even in those few moments.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 226) And yet, memory comes back in “riptides” (O’Callaghan 2013, 222). The chiasmic pattern of sounds, “riptide” echoing “timetrips that deepen and dissolve” in the following sentence, links the sea image of the tide to memory, to the light of a darkening day and to passing time. Just as the narrator feels torn between his belonging to the home where his son lives and his yearning to go away, “darkness is splitting,” (O’Callaghan 2013, 224) and the landscape created by the tricks of the light corresponds to an ambivalent perception, as if stark duality appealed to the character more than the subtle shifting nuances of movement.

In “Soft Rain,” “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind” and “Another Country”, the protagonists seem to experience a real difficulty in viewing seascapes as open spaces, characterised by change and movement and not as an enclosed portion of space

defying time. This is revealed in part by the role of frames in the landscapes and in the way the narratives themselves are described. Both “Soft Rain” and “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind” begin with narratives opening the perspective one or two miles from the village and end on the main characters leaving their village and birthplace for good. The space of the village appears detached from the rest and seems the object of embedded zooms. The narratives can thus be viewed as the framed pictures of moments of subtle transformation. In “Soft Rain”, windows do not fulfil their usual function of framing views. They are filthy and block both the air and the light: “windows have grown stiff as unused limbs. Air has stopped circulating. Sunshine when it hits the glass pane is barely visible.” (McKinney 2013, 4) No circulation of either air or light is possible. But when Henry Martin eventually leaves the house he grew up in, his sadness is “mild” and a cycle has been completed. In “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind,” on the contrary, the narrator has escaped a situation he judged unbearable. The door opening onto the cottage frames a scene he has always known: “Tommy is in the kitchen, sitting hunched over in a hard chair with his elbows resting on his knees and his hands laced together in a prayerful grip. He looks up when I come to the back door.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 216) As opposed to “Soft Rain” the windows frame an open sky and a wide ocean:

Outside, the sky is doing something new to the light. The sun has slipped behind the fringe of western cloud. The colours feel too raw to be natural, but the salt-flecked window frames a scene that is undeniably immaculate to a painterly eye. (O’Callaghan 2013, 219)

As the story progresses, the gaze of the narrator of “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind” is more and more detached, and the scene subtly shifts from place and memories lovingly kept alive, to a more distanced appreciation of what he sees, which is presented as a painted landscape, viewed from a distance. In the same way, when first arriving

on the island, he had felt torn between his sense of belonging to the place and a feeling of estrangement, closer to that experienced by a mere visitor. The beginning of the short story tells how he had managed to survive with the abstract, disembodied images of the place as he remembered it, turning him into an anonymous visitor, rather different from the island dweller he used to be. The narrator is torn between the sense of home and the tragic sense of loss attached to the place. He has travelled the world over and visited many cities, (“much the same as the next until you give up on the cities” (O’Callaghan 2013, 217)), but he has become an exile and a stranger in his own country, experiencing place as a liminal space, in-between the past and the future, the here and there, loss and belonging. Upon returning to his place of birth where his son still lives, he finds himself halfway between the tourist the children take him for, and the dweller who knows his bearings. The juxtaposition of the postcard descriptions of the father-in-law’s cottage he has kept in his mind while travelling, with the intimate knowledge of the light, the rhythm and the language of the place, tells of the depth of attachment to a place. This awareness emphasises the inalienable sense of belonging, while at the same time underlining the tragedy of life, as time passes and reality itself becomes an illusion. The framing structures in this story, as well as in “A Different Country”, emphasize the crucial role of such thresholds as symbols of this in-between space between two worlds. Just as the seashore separates the sea from the land, the landscapes described in the short stories become metaphors of life and of relationships to places. The framed views become metaphors of place as a suspended moment of being between two spaces. In “A Different Country” two worlds are presented as Jonathan and Sarah arrive from Dublin in the part of the Inishowen Peninsula where Jonathan grew up. Sarah discovers that his name there is Johnny and that even his language and accent change. On their way to the Peninsula, both Sarah and Jonathan had gauged the landscape as Dublin students of architecture, imagining everything anew, with buildings opening out on views of the sea. But once they arrive at the

cottage, the contrast is stark. The framing of the bedroom window opens on a concrete wall and on a tangle of negligently thrown orange netting. The text subtly echoes the “tangle of orange netting” (McLaughlin 2013, 12) and its trite maritime usage, with “the tangle of green vegetation” on the next page (McLaughlin 2013, 13), linking what Sarah saw as discarded fishing material with the natural realm. The sea activities of human beings are entangled with nature.

In all the stories, frames and boundaries contribute to shifting the focus to the crucial role of thresholds and to the transformations taking place within these liminal spaces where decaying wrecks and ruins are scattered on the landscape and clearly point to the effects of passing time. Almost all these stories contain the wreck of a car slowly rusting in the backyard. In Lloyd’s *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* photographs by Allan de Souza of wrecked cars in the Donegal landscape are associated with ruins of the past, and to Lloyd they evoke “the spectre of an always imminent contemporary violence.... De Souza’s photography indicates how violence saturates the normal and everyday with its threatening imminence.” (Lloyd 2008, 5) Ruins and decaying bodies are the signs, not only of change and movement, but also of imminent catastrophe. In “Soft Rain” the house is crumbling: “Stained with green moss” (McKinney 2013, 2) and “the window ledges have sunk so low they scrape the ground.” (McKinney 2013, 2) The paint is flaking and the garden is a “wilderness of bindweed and nettles.” (McKinney 2013, 2) The house, the furniture and the father’s body are described in similar terms. In the same vein, the narrative subtly associates the image of the old furniture which “spills out like burst guts after a car accident” (McKinney 2013, 2) with the image of the mother who has just died after she was hit by a car while cycling. The narrative is extremely precise and sounds at times like stage directions. The scale at which the place is described is extremely small and getting smaller as the story progresses, from a mythic natural landscape to the house, to the bedroom, and to the father’s body until he passes

silently away in the course of one sentence. The landscape reopens again as his son Henry leaves the house: “Cold November fills the house he walks away from” (McKinney 2013, 6). The last word of the story is the preposition “from”, emphasizing both Henry’s leaving and the immediate presence of nature taking over its rights and domination of the place. Bodies, like material goods are described as being submitted to the decaying effect of time. Tommy’s body in “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind,” is described as “truly infirmed,” (O’Callaghan 2013, 223) his hand “nothing but rags and sticks.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 218) The general impression is of bodies and landscapes in ruins. They can be linked to what Lloyd notes about ruins and the structure of myths, as well as the circulation between past and present:

Ruins (...) have the structure of myth, though not always in the same sense or with the same valence. And they are subject to the paradox of myth. Detached from a given moment of the past, they float free into relation with the present, fragments of an archaic past that continue to work in and on the present. (Lloyd 2008, 15)

In questioning the myth of permanence and pointing out the instability of place and home, “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind,” “Soft Rain” and “A Different Country” reveal the ambivalence of myths and the complex links between past and present. The breach described in the landscape of the short stories between past and present, tradition and modernity, loss and belonging, unsettles the actual modes of representations. Just as Lloyd sees in de Souza’s photographs “the rhythmic process of metamorphosis,” (Lloyd 2008, 21) the five narratives also represent a process of metamorphosis, pointing out how the catastrophes of our times can be inscribed within a broader cyclical pattern of regeneration:

The rhythmic process of metamorphosis, through which each of the images, human and material, flows in slow motion into the next, suggests the potentiality of a relation

of the human subject to its past and to the natural world that defies an ecology of domination. (Lloyd 2008, 21)

As they move about through the dusk, or in the mist, the characters of the short stories embody place as in-betweenness, a form of what Malpas calls “emergence,” at once bounded and dynamic, the locus where metamorphosis and regeneration take place through the characters’ bodies and perceptions. In this in-between space, time moves on and characters are transformed, while relationships to place and between the characters are regenerated.

The short stories studied in this essay show that present day events can be included in a mythical cycle of loss, catastrophe and possible regeneration. While all the short stories play the role of mythical cathartic narratives, in Donovan and Barry’s stories language ironically and self-reflexively questions the regenerative capacity of Irish landscapes today, as well as the power of myth in our contemporary times.

In both stories, the lexical field of delusion and deception is overwhelming, and words such as “tricks”, “crooked” or “distortion” are repeated several times. The stories in fact embody place. Just like the ebb and flow of memory, or when the light begins to split and time slowly unfolds, language strives to tell what it means to belong to a place or to leave a place. Reality appears distorted, as the narrator of “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind” explains, using the simile of the glass fragment: “my old world and this one now seem like the two perspectives offered by a piece of one-way glass.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 212) Sound, just as light, is described tricking perceptions and distorting visions of the landscape and the world as the narrator listens to the radio: “the station is slipping in and out of tune in a way that brings a wonderful and priceless sense of distortion to the piece.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 217)

Beyond distortion, catastrophe is manifested present in two of the stories. “Festus” and “Fjord of Killary” are set towards the end of the Celtic Tiger boom, with the tragedy of the bust already looming in the distance, while a sense of foreboding and imminent catastrophe prevails. The narratives explore two versions of the Flood, which as Corbin notes, marks “a temporary return to chaos.” (Corbin 1994, 3) In “Festus” the narrative takes place after the catastrophe of the financial bust in an unnamed seaside resort and former tourist destination. The main character, Festus Burke, who has just been made redundant, is shown retreating to the highest room of the highest building in the village, one that is rarely lit, so he can escape the catastrophe which he fears is pending. The short story begins in media res, unveiling the plot retrospectively: “not long afterwards when it was all done, Festus Burke understood that he went to the top of the hill because he must have known what was going to happen to him and the people in the town below.” (Donovan 2011, 69) Set in a small town that could be any anonymous seaside resort, the striking landscape factor is the mist that reigns over the village: “an ocean fog curled up to the first houses and wrapped around the church spire.” (Donovan 2011, 69) Although the blanket seems cosy (“curled up,” “wrapped”), on the day when the story is set, a slight breeze seems to be blowing after days of complete stillness: “There hadn’t been a wind in days, but in the faint first light the white mist scuttled on a breath coming up from the water, silent and free over the empty streets.” (Donovan 2011, 69) The story emphasizes the sense of foreboding in repeating Festus’ impression that “something was going to happen.” (Donovan 2011, 69) The greyness and the silence are overwhelming during the whole story, which ends on a helpless pleading after Festus recalls the day he had lost his job: “Something should be done. Festus raised the glass to his lips and did not know what should be done, but someone should do something.” (Donovan 2011, 77) The looming sense of pending catastrophe is emphasized by the neutral pronouns which frame the narrative (“something,” “someone”) matched by the constant mist wrapping the streets, blocking the

horizon and endowing the landscape with an apocalyptic quality. Edward S. Casey signals fog and darkness as the exceptions when every last edge is swallowed up. (Casey 2011, 92) In that exceptional context, the feeling of in-betweenness disappears, boundaries cease to exist, and places become blurred.

In “Fjord of Killary” the rising of the waters is not only dreaded, but is the actual core event of the short story. Here, the narrator also starts in media res as if buying the hotel on the fjord of Killary was the only logical thing to do at the time, when “the city had become a jag on [my] his nerves.” (Barry 2013, 29) The story begins on a concluding tone: “so I bought an old hotel on the fjord of Killary.” (Barry 2013, 27) In an overall humorous tone the narrator tells of his rapid realization that the whole enterprise was a mistake. The first sentence underlines the hardly welcoming location of the hotel: “It was set hard by the harbour wall, with Mweelrea mountain across the water, and disgracefully grey skies above. It rained two hundred and eighty-seven days of the year, and the locals were given to magnificent mood swings.” (Barry 2013, 27) The narrator recounts his first months at the hotel and the waters then start rising. As in “Festus,” the landscape is shrouded in blankets of mist and the “visibility [is] reduced to fourteen feet.” (Barry 2013, 33) But just as the water breaks over the harbour walls, the view suddenly becomes clearer to the narrator, like a rebirth. Regarding landscape and perception in misty weather Tim Ingold writes: “as an experience of light, sound and feeling that suffuses our awareness, the weather is not so much an object of perception as what we perceive in.” (Ingold 2011, 130) In focusing our attention on mist, Ingold does not so much consider mist as an element of weather, but he insists on the altering of perception. In “Festus” and “Fjord of Killary”, just as the mist shifts the characters’ perspectives on reality and enables them to view the truth about the financial situation of their country and its consequences, the flood, or the threat thereof, enables the reader to perceive a shift in the general sense of the short story, as it signals the beginning of a reversal.

This process of metamorphosis can be observed in all five short stories. In “A Different Country,” as Sarah realizes how the seascape separates her from Jonathan, it gradually contaminates her too. She becomes aware of the natural sea-like rhythm of her breath: “Sarah became conscious of the in and out of her own breath.” (McLoughlin 2013, 17) Her whole set of references is overturned as she loses touch first with her boyfriend, then with her clichéd perception of the landscape and finally with herself. The story ends poetically on her suspended gesture as she prepares to finish off a baby seal and to turn into a killer of animals, whereas an instant before she had thought of herself as an ardent protector of animal life. Her preconceptions of harmony with the cosmos as a Dubliner are utterly transformed as she realizes that killing the seals means protecting the fishermen’s jobs and actually protecting the way of life of fishing families who live there, of which Jonathan/Johnny is an inheritor. The regenerative function of the sea is also visible in “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind,” Although the narrator was drawn to his home, he nonetheless compares it to “disease” and “a poison.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 219) He is transformed by the place and even his language is changed: “it takes the better part of a minute for me to recognize the fact that we are conversing in Irish.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 217)

However, through the ellipses that structure them, the short form of these works of fiction emphasizes not only the fundamental loss, but also the regenerative process of which they are part. The processes of regeneration and metamorphosis are most explicit in “Fjord of Killary” where, albeit ironically, the receding of the flood reveals a transformed narrator. Like Noah after the Biblical Flood, the narrator has become a new man whose vision of life and the world seems to be utterly regenerated. The short story ends on an uplifting note as the narrator, finding the inspiration to write again, declares: “the gloom of youth had at last lifted.” (Barry 2013, 45) With strong echoes of Flann O’Brien’s satirical tone, the narrator’s adventure and the metamorphosis of his point of view suggest the realization of a possible

future. In “The Things we Lose, the Things we Leave Behind,” the beloved women’s deaths are not mentioned but only gradually hinted at, so that the reader is made to guess the reason for their absence, and perceive the emotional abyss caused by their loss. Elizabeth’s death is hinted at when the narrative mentions that she was “already gone by now in the toughest way imaginable and buried to a great depth” (O’Callaghan 2013, 219), in similar terms as those used to describe her son’s eyes later in the short story (“he has her eyes (...) mirroring the sea (...) its greater depths,” (O’Callaghan 2013, 221)) thus linking them semantically. But her death is not stated explicitly, although the reader understands that she might have attempted suicide (“why Elizabeth did what she did.” (O’Callaghan 2013, 226)). In “Soft Rain”, as Henry finishes the daily shaving of his father, the narrative hints at the death of the old man as something that has already happened, and is followed by Henry at last leaving his native home and seascape:

it’s not until he’s finished that he realizes death has been and gone (...) his sadness is mild (...) before he leaves he puts his shoulder to the window. Cold November fills the house he walks away from. (McKinney 2013, 6)

The very structure of the narrative embodies the cycle to which loss belongs, ending on the subtle death of the father and opening, as in a spiral, on Henry Martin’s leaving the place at last, with the house immediately filled by a personification of the season (“November fills”). The last word of the narrative is the preposition “from,” which stresses both the radical nature and the regenerative process of Henry’s departure from his house. Significantly, the “from” it ends on signs the openness imprinted in the final lines of the narrative. Like the four other short stories, this story is decidedly turned towards the future and the openness of place.

The five stories subtly question the permanence and solidity of seascapes as well as the attachment to place in their relation to seascapes. In *Being Alive*, Tim Ingold denounces

our land-based perspective and the very concept of “landscape” applied to views of the sea. To the dichotomy between the sea and the land, home and beyond, these short stories offer a change in perspective that can be compared to the shift from “landscape” to “weather-world” which Ingold develops in his book, quite similar to Casey’s “place-world.” (Casey 2011, 107) Opposing his concept of “weather-world” to “landscape,” he compares the two to “the contrast drawn by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari between striated and smooth space.” (Ingold 2011, 132) The short stories studied here all gradually come to illustrate this smooth space where the surfaces of the land, “like those of the sea – open up to the sky and embrace it.” (Ingold 2011, 132) What the characters and the readers of the stories have learnt in the process, is to “sea” the land and the experience of place as permeated by change and movement. The present catastrophes have undergone a process of metamorphosis and point to the possibilities of a future. Just as Nicolas Fève explains in his introduction to *Connemara and Elsewhere* in which his photographs illustrate and question Tim Robinson’s work, “photography here is about opening a gap, an in-between, a distance where one can find where one stands [...] It transports to an estranged place.” (Elder, et al. 2014, 29) The five stories can also be read as opening a gap and creating an “in-between”: in-between the ebb and the flow, the mythical past and the future, on the misty threshold between the memory of light and sounds, and the present. As such, they embody a contemporary sense of place characterized not by pause and enclosure, but by movements of expansion and openness. Place is the present moment, emerging between what has gone past and what is yet to come.

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