

Lift up your hearts



Pádraig Ó Tuama
continues our series

I HAVE lived a nomadic life for decades. To be in the same place for two weeks without even a short trip was unimaginable. In March, contracts began to be postponed. Then, everything was cancelled. Months of unfilled space opened up, with yawning anxiety. Ten weeks into lockdown in the Irish countryside, I've found myself more rooted in the Fermanagh-Donegal borderlands than I ever thought possible. It's a beautiful and strange place, this. Animals and birds and water and air do not recognise the borders of empires or maps.

For the last year I've been watching a pair of hares. Big beasts: powerful, gorgeous, with eyes on the side of their heads and muscular hind legs. In Irish mythology, they're messengers of the Underworld. No surprise — they can reach a sprint speed of up to 50 miles per hour.

Watching them, I've wondered about collective nouns for hares. A husk; a trip; a down; a drove. And, do they have a patron saint? I looked it up. They do. Melangell.

IN THE sixth century, Melangell, the daughter of an Irish king, fled Ireland to avoid an unwanted marriage. She lived and prayed in a copse in Wales. Hares abounded. When the Prince of Powys, Brochwel Yscythrog, was hunting hares, one fled to Melangell and found shelter under her cloak. Not even dogs would approach the woman at prayer. The hare was safe.



St Melangell, Patron Saint of Hares, by Deborah Sheehy

I DON'T always sleep well. At times, it's so bad that I'll wake after about an hour of sleep and be awake for most of the rest of the night. In those times, I've been going outside, looking at the dark, listening to the sounds of the night.

Bad sleep can make a day of work difficult. To hold it together, I've been playing Max Richter's epic *Sleep* as background music for working. It's more than eight hours long: an experimental orchestral suite that is an exploration of sleep patterns. At times, it feels like the instruments are breathing the breath of sleep for me — simple, repeated phrases that sound like a body.

There are dreamscapes in this magnificent work of art, and the cycles of sleep are intuited in instruments that begin to sound

like friends. When this piece is publicly performed, seats are removed from theatres, and beds are placed there instead. The music begins late, and plays through the night.

To this background accompaniment, I mutter the **words of St Augustine**: "Watch, dear Lord, with those who wake, or watch, or sleep this night. . ." If I can't sleep, language and music can do it for me. It's not an answer, but it helps. I've carried a pair of rosary beads in my pocket, too. I don't have the words, but I like holding them.

I NORMALLY take a particular poet and read through his or her work over the course of a year. Last year, it was Lorna Goodison; the year before that, it was R. S. Thomas; the two years before that, Emily Dickinson. This year, I'm spending time in the company of **William Butler Yeats**.

Born in 1865, he was a prolific poet, and a statesman. He had high ideals — of love, poetry, mythology, and Irish independence — most of which were dashed over the

The Prince was so moved that he gave land to Melangell, who became the abbess of a small religious community, offering sanctuary to those who sought it there. The church still stands, and is a place of pilgrimage.

I began looking around for icons or **paintings** of Melangell, and was moved by this piece by Deborah Sheehy. I love the earthy brown of the background, and how both characters depicted, the saint and the hare, seem to come from this earth. The hare's ears are in different positions, as if it can lower its guard, and needs only to half-listen for hunters.

Melangell herself — that skin looks as if it is made from chalky clay — has her eyes closed in prayer. The hare watches the woman in prayer.

Each has their gaze fixed on something protective. It's like a trinity of attention: the hare gives attention to the woman in prayer; the woman in prayer gives attention to the God of hares; who gives attention to the earth, from which all living things come.

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course of his life; and his poetry reads like a study in how to turn to mythologies.

At times, his entitled background irritates me; at others, I marvel at a man whose command of English is infused with the musical assonances of Irish poetry, even though he did not have a great command of Irish:

Where the wandering water gushes
From the hills above Glen-Car,
In pools among the rushes
That scarce could bathe a star,
We seek for slumbering trout
And whispering in their ears
Give them unquiet dreams;
Leaning softly out
From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.

This verse, the third from his poem “The Stolen Child”, written when Yeats was in his very early twenties, is one of my favourites.

Fairies — an awkward translation of the Irish *Sídh* — speak. Mischievous, they like troubling trout’s dreams; they seem like children themselves, but are also older than the streams that trout dream in. The love of landscape is evident in this poem, and Yeats is communicating something deeper than mythology — something about himself which will be part of his life for ever.

More than mythology, more than mad-denying love, he is always a poet who is torn between things — between the Ireland he has and the Ireland he wants; between the language of stories and the language he writes in; between his imagination and his compromises. Some of his mythologies are bewildering, but, throughout, his torn heart breaks me and holds me together, whether

I’m reading him in the middle of the night or in the morning.

Once, at dawn, when I was reading some Yeats by the kitchen light, the two hares passed near me. They stopped. They ate. They looked around. They copulated. They ate some more. There was the smell of dew and damp earth. The morning was young. They were like an Adam and an Eve of the Irish countryside. Messengers of the underworld. I’m trying to listen.

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Prints of St Melangell, Patron Saint of Hare by Deborah Sheehy are available to buy from the artist’s website, www.deborahsheehy.com, and Etsy shop, www.etsy.com/uk/shop/HoneybeeandtheHare.

Next week: *Chine McDonald*

Richer, not poorer

IN 1961, Cicely Williams, known to her friends as “Bim”, published *Bishop’s Wife But Still Myself*, an account of her life leading up to and including her time as the wife of the Bishop of Leicester, the Rt Revd Ronald Williams (Bishop from 1953 to 1979).

Bim did not fit the conventional image of the clergy wife at the time. Her greatest love was mountain climbing, she found diocesan events dull, and her book is full of unexpected events, told with relish:

On holiday in Maltese hotel:

I had repaired to the “Ladies” when Ronald came thundering on the door.

“Come out, quick — the place is on fire.”

“Tripe,” I replied rudely, “you always think there’s going to be a fire.”

(The building filled with smoke, but it was being fumigated, not incinerated.)

With an Army wife:

My one real clanger was . . . in letting a rather large lady nearby know that I did wear jeans but did not wear corsets. Both habits she thought quite revolting.

Opening her first garden fete:

Ronald wrote the speech for me and I [had] tried to learn it by heart. I stood up in what seemed to be a roaring gale, peering at the bit of paper containing Ronald’s speech,



Bim and Ronald Williams, in a photo from 1952 or 1953

since I could not remember a word of it. I had got through a few lines when a sudden gust blew the paper from my trembling fingers, leaving me in the middle of a sentence.

Also in the book, Bim tells the story of her husband’s serious illness, and his slow recovery after surgery:

We had many ups and downs. The path of a coalescent is never easy, but no two

people could have received more help and encouragement. At last . . . the surgeon gave his longed-for verdict: Ronald could leave hospital on Monday. . .

The last Sunday in hospital was Palm Sunday. Dick [Mayston, later Provost of Leicester] and [his wife] Netta came up to have a wonderful thanksgiving Communion service with us. Our hearts were full, and the service expressed exactly what we all felt. Ronald was allowed out for lunch and we all went to the Club and had a truly festive

meal. . . It seemed as if years rather than weeks had passed. It was a wonderful occasion; we all realised that something very precious, and which we had nearly lost, had been given back to us. . .

Life would never be the same again after such an experience, but it would be richer rather than poorer. When things were at their darkest Dick had said to me, “In time to come you and Ronald will look back on this experience as a very great blessing.” Already we know how right he was.