

Leave the Calling-Card



There is a map in my head, and I pick the four elements of my childhood compass. Roads were meaningful back then; the asphalt road had its own scent. After rainfall in Summertime, it was intoxicating – mooched through nostrils, as dust rose. Broad leaves of the chestnut trees, buds of amber bursting out, contrive to make me a child again. I stand still.

The road behind me goes West and brings me to a lake that is sunk in glacial sheet-rock, created by the receding ice-age. This place was out of bounds, except when sheep were dipped for fly diseases, in the month of June. Children always helped with the muster – a sort of noisy, sweaty, heat-filled time, when the scabby fly was being eradicated. The wheel of the year, sheep and wool, fishing and gillies, dogs retrieving woodcock and pheasants.

A large herd of feral goats stood on a high escarpment and watched from a distance; outlined against the sky – wild bearded animals that seemed to live in some no-man's paradise. They instilled fear in me. Far across the panorama is a series of mountain ranges: Tourmakeady; Partry; Croagh Patrick, that holy mountain – and away northwards, the Ox Mountain peaks are visible, all pale pastel colours. A bird can get there quicker than by road.

I face East and head to the village of Cong that once housed many Monks. It

was declared the seat of European learning in the Middle Ages. Now in ruins, the Royal Abbey has a singular surviving cloister. Echoes of evensong lingers on the breeze. Augustinian monks resided there for centuries. The monks maintained large numbers of beehives on the shores of Lough Corrib, near Ashford Castle, where the Cong river empties itself into the lake. Now the doorways with Roman stonework, by French stonemasons, allow the rooks to fly through. The lonesome lulling sound from a sawmill can be heard, the rise and fall of saws humming in the morning, melancholy by the afternoon. There is work being done. The forest is pruned, and timber is a commodity to be sold.

I exit out the Tower gates and meander through fields full of dents and hollows. It is Moytura, where the *Tuatha De Danann* fought the *Fir Bolg*. A perfect circle of tall standing stones appears to connive with themselves. They are a mystery, locked into the narrative of ancient ages. It is utterly quiet here, only a moving car eases the silence. My eye catches the beauty of forests and blue mountains. Is this paradise? Did all those warriors see it too? Perhaps it was their Eden. They choose to stay and lie in the sweet clay.

Going North, the road takes me to Ballinrobe, two miles away from Lough Mask. It is a town with many fine tall grey stone buildings. One of those is the Library in the grounds of St. Mary's Church of Ireland, where my mother went on Saturday evenings. She enrolled me there when I was eight years of age. I loved everything about that library: the broad wooden floorboards that creaked and sagged when stepped upon, the high ceiling, rows of books, and that quiet atmosphere only found in places of contemplation.

After the visit to pick out the reading books, we would head to Miss Maye's shop for ginger ale and cheesecakes, freshly baked in their own bakery. The town is a place of second-level schools, religious and lay. It was the birthplace of Doctor Noel Browne, who spearheaded the treatment of Tuberculosis in Ireland. His sanatorium still stands there, empty, at the centre of the horse-racing track. surrounded by rolling green fields.

I go South, through the woods, along the road and past the neat house of the three old women who looked like Russian dolls, impeccably dressed in black, winter or summer, until I arrive at Clonbur, in the parish where my maternal grandmother lived. She was tall, and her heart was equally big. Even her neighbours called her Mom, but to me, she was Grandma, and also my godmother. I loved going to her. I knew she loved me, but she never said so.

I lie in a feather bed at her house and can hear the radio playing in the kitchen. I listen to it, to the sounds and words: Mizzen Head, Luxembourg, Berlin, Petersburg. The loud tick of the grandfather clock sometimes interrupted with a bell, then ticked on again, slow, real slow. There is time, all the time in the world.

At breakfast, she will warm the milk. While I wait, I will look out front at the broad expanse of the Corrib Lake. Many islands lie like green emeralds upon the blue water. I now know that there are many roads home.

Margaret Kiernan writes poetry and prose and, has been published in both; in journals, magazines, periodicals, and in international anthology collections and both in print and on-line. She is in *The Index of Contemporary Women Poets in Ireland*. She also loves to paint and has exhibited her artworks.

Mark Jones, the editor at *Lothlorien Press & Poetry Journal* nominated *Leave the Calling-Card* for the *Best of The Net Award* for creative non-fiction in 2021.

Photo of Lough Corrib near Ashford Castle courtesy of Vincent Campbell