What the Wolf Heard
Also by Daragh Breen

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What the Wolf Heard

SAMPLER

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1969. Armstrong drags his bad leg across the moon.

In Dingle they are replacing their tarpaulin flooring with carpets. The Hollywood machine is doubling the average fisherman’s income by getting them to produce plastic rocks that will make the local landscape look even more desolate for the making of ‘Ryan’s Daughter’. They waited on the beach out at Dun Quin for four months for an authentic storm, and when it finally arrived it was so unnaturally fierce that the locals, extras in their own clothing, nearly drowned as the cameras rolled.

Four decades earlier, up the harsh Atlantic coast on the Aran Islands, they plaited seaweed into the rock to create a soil in which to plant, as a well-fed English film crew watched on.

7 years after Armstrong, I sat beneath the photographs of the set of ‘Ryan’s Daughter’ in Kruger’s as my mother brought the stories of the filming back from the bar and my father let me taste his bitter black pint. Through a rain battered window I could make out the hump of the Great Blasket like a sleeping whale, and I day-dreamed about a life of isolation on the island.

23 years later, as I sat in the shadow of the ruined church beside the hall in which they were screening ‘Man of Aran’ and listened to you sing your father’s song, I began to trace the lineage of my ghosts in the air around me.
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The Lighthouses

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In a small hole in the ground wasps made a paper skull, congealing in miniature weirs as they piled over each other.

To increase the tight cavity space, the growing nest like a cranium pressing against flesh, the wasps carried water from a nearby puddle, secreted it against the earthen wall, then devoured the softened soil and deposited it outside.

Hundreds of wasps clambered about the moistened wall, a shoal tight in a dragnet, a skull lodged tight in the dark.
Skelligs (High); 1826, inactive since 1870;
Skelligs (Low); 1967, 53 metres, 3 white flashes,
separated by 2.5 seconds, every 15 seconds.
Storms off-shore constantly shed their skins of waves
as the chasing shoals hover beneath the surface
to feed on the scattered debris.
On the coast road to Dun Quin
a white alabaster Christ crucified in the rain
overhangs a sheer cliff
with the grief of waves
keening against the cold stone face below.
A fury of seabirds and gulls rise
from out of the foam-frayed waves
like blown snow
and bring a blush of whiteness
to the cold dark cliff stone
where they rest and wait.

The storm-thawed light is the same distilled light
as that of the travelling cinemas
that once came through here,
a sheet hung against the damp wall of a hall
by representatives of the Lumière Brothers,
Magi of the Second Coming of Light,
breaking an egg-shape of white against a screen
that began to leak human shadows.

This is where the ghosts come ashore,
peeling the noise of gulls from their tired bodies like sleep,
trailing tide-lines of salt
along the winter beaches in their wake.
Mutton Island; 1817, inactive since 1977;
Aran North; 1857, 35 metres, white flash every 15 seconds;
Inishmore; 1818, inactive since 1857.
Morning on Inis Mór, the musty rust smell of where ocean meets land, the gauze of drizzle snagging like cobwebs against the stone walls and the pre-history muscle-smell of bulls, creatures that broke free of the water one morning coming snorting ashore fully formed.

Dusk, just above the horizon, the sun is the blood-soaked reds of a foal’s birthing sack, as it torches the water it becomes a bonfire.

The constant wind is a ragged gown that trails mosses and lichens across the bare rock. Lone trees, like soft wax blown onto the wind and stiffened in an instant by the cold of the night in which they are formed, keen in the drizzle for their landscape. Narrow tombs of stone walls stretch their bones around the tiny fields. Out on the water, random light plays on the water’s surface like a giant fishing-lure.
Slyne Head; 1836, 35 metres, 2 white flashes, separated by 2.4 seconds, every 15 seconds;
Slyne Head; 1836, 18 metres, inactive since 1898;
Inisheer; 1857, 34 metres, white light 6 seconds on, 6 seconds off, red light is shown over rocks to the East.
Across the surface of Connemara bogs
damp bricks of turf are domed in small piles
like worm-casts on tide-receding beaches,
in the coffin-still pools they leave behind
the late summer sun sets, spilling its colours
like a fall of Japanese sacred fish.
These colours, these wind-pigments of loneliness
have been gathered by William’s brother and
layered onto canvasses of rural horse fairs
and archaeological excavations of circuses
rendered in rancid flesh, the soft mushroom flesh
of the clown’s faces, drowned in earth,
their red make-up smeared like haggish Ophelias.

Amongst the hillocks of rusting metal
on the narrow harbour at Rossaveal,
waiting for a ferry to the Aran Islands,
three elderly Japanese women sit patiently
in white wide-brimmed sun hats,
they have come to see where the sun sets.

The low weeping waves at autumn’s dusk
slowly drag their grey manes back
towards the lobster pots that the local women’s
ghost sons have lowered across
the mouths of the inlets.