



Foregone Hillsides

ISLAND OF WOODS



I WAS WALKING UP A GRASSY SLOPE in the Burren on an overcast September afternoon with the poet Moya Cannon. To the other side of the road below us rose a facing hill. We could hear the insistent voices of sheep across the valley, track their southward drift whenever we turned round to stretch our backs and vary our view from the close-cropped turf before us and the scatter of wild garlic just coming into flower. As our path continued a sparse flock of shrubs began to tuft up. Soon after that we arrived at a zone where hazels grew amid a tumble of boulders woolly with moss. There was a cave-mouth, too, in this stony wrinkle of land situated south of Kinvara and just below Eagles' Rock. Close to the cave, a spring welled up through a crack in the limestone to fill a holy well festooned with what seem to be Mardi Gras beads. A few laminated saints' cards were displayed on nearby stones, while a tiny plastic troll dangled by its pink hair from a branch.

Moya had led me to the cave because in the seventh-century Saint Colman MacDuagh had established his hermitage here. As we caught our breath she drew my attention to a number of hoof-shaped marks in the smooth stone at some distance from the cave mouth. They anchored an arresting tale of how once, on a chilly Easter morning, the saint and his acolyte knelt to pray for something to eat after the long austerities of Lent were finally over. Just as they did so, Colman's kinsman King Guaire was sitting down to a feast with his retinue at DunGuaire, near the present settlement of Kinvara. Suddenly, the laden plates lifted off the surface of their battered oak table and sailed over the treetops. Guaire's party saddled up and galloped after their disappearing dinner, forging up the same hillside we ourselves had just climbed and never taking their eyes off the flotilla of food advancing before them. They were sweating forward as the plates began to settle down in front of Colman and his companion. Then the whole company rattled to a halt. Their horses' hooves had stuck fast to the stone, preventing a nearer approach to the cave. Only when the saint and his young helper had finished their meal were the royal visitors allowed to continue toward them.

In Benedict and Hilari's workshop dedicated to the music of Clare we learned a fling called "Dunguaire" that brought a cheerful syncopation to this venerable saint's tale. There's a similarly light-hearted quality to the name by which the track between DunGuaire and the hermitage is known to this day: *Bothar na Mias*, the Road of the Dishes. And those intriguing imprints in the stone continue to be pondered by residents of the Burren and visitors alike as they stroll up that path for

themselves on a pleasant afternoon. Different versions of the story work with this narrative topography in startlingly divergent ways, however. Early saints' tales were often vehicles for certifying the Irish Church's ascendancy after a period in which clerics and Druids contended for dominance. In one way of relating the cave to the hoof-marks, the king and his company set out to *recapture* their dinner but were so impressed by the saint's miracle-working power that they requested baptism by him then and there at the holy well. This account doubly dramatizes the emergent faith's superior power.

A different angle on the tale emerges in J. Fahey's 1893 *History of the Diocese of Kilmacduagh*. In that account, Guaire, already a believer, prayed before sitting down to his feast that it might go to support the work of some holy man. Then he and his company followed delightedly after the dishes to see who the beneficiary might be. But a question arises here about those miraculous marks where the horsemen slammed to a stop. Did Colman not recognize his pious cousin? Fahey's version, like the other one, stipulates that he waited to release Guaire's retinue until after his acolyte and he had finished their meal, and even then he did so only after an entreaty from the king.

As we reflected on the gaps and internal tensions that give this story the shadowy fascination of an ancient ballad, Moya Cannon mentioned that her naturalist friend Gordon D'Arcy could tell an altogether different story about the marks at which we were gazing. Similar puddled depressions may be found in parts of the Burren far from the saint's cave, he might point out. These are "solution hollows", marking where the fossils of brachiopods had surfaced and then been eroded away.

Leslie Marmon Silko, reflecting on the myths and chronicles adhering to boulders, buttes, arroyos, and other stony landmarks of northern New Mexico, has remarked how in an oral tradition one version of a given tale often corrects or fills out another way of telling it. It is inevitable that in a long-settled landscape like Ireland or the desert around her own people's home at Laguna Pueblo, a community's foundational tales will differ in dramatic ways depending on the identity and agenda of the teller. But as long as the story-telling remains a collective enterprise that focuses on enduring elements of the shared landscape, such varying accounts can combine to reinforce the people's sense of identity. As Silko writes, "The ancient Pueblo people sought a communal truth, not an absolute. For them this truth lived somewhere within the web of differing versions, disputes over minor points, outright contradictions tangling with old feuds and village rivalries." In the Burren, similarly, walking up in company to inspect those mysterious marks by Colman's cave unfolds the map for a widening conversation.

↪ Two days after our outing to the cave, Moya and I were both heading to Galway to participate in a celebration of Tim Robinson's writing and maps. It turned out to be the first of several such programs, during the four years covered by this memoir, that marked the completion of his remarkable *Connemara* trilogy and also surveyed Robinson's projects leading up to that achievement. Professor Jane Conroy of the National University of Ireland at Galway was a lead organizer of the entire sequence of events. Though Rita was not able to

join me on this occasion I still wanted to make the trip because of the ways Robinson had deepened my appreciation for the affinity between the whipsawed beauty of western Ireland and that of the Green Mountains.

Both regions experienced dramatic depopulation in the middle of the nineteenth-century, with emigration setting the seal, in one case, on famine and starvation; in the other, on heedless deforestation followed quickly by the American Civil War. In this part of Connacht and in Vermont alike, settlements and farms languished in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. In their quiet, old-fashioned character, though, both regions also came to symbolize a refreshing alternative to the rapid pace of modern life. This was the surprising upshot of large-scale abandonment. Robinson's writing insists, as noted earlier, that western Ireland should continue to be understood as a wounded landscape as well as a beautiful retreat. It is this perspective on the mysterious alignment of loss and recovery, suffering and compassion, that has most illuminated kindred realities in the ecological and cultural topography of my Vermont home.

Much of the program celebrating Robinson took place within the thick stone walls of the Druid Theatre in Galway's historical center. As writers, artists, and scholars rose one after another to talk about how his work had enriched their understanding of Ireland's land and culture, Tim and Máiréad sat decorously in the front row—holding their famously dry humor on a short leash and restraining their fidgets amid what must have sometimes seemed an interminable swell of praise. Finally, when it was his turn to stand up, he delivered a talk

called "A Land Without Shortcuts." While his books on the Aran Islands and Connemara had asserted that loss and dislocation needed to be incorporated into any authentic affirmation of the landscape's meaning, Robinson was not focusing now on relics or memories. He was concerned, rather, about immediate dangers to fragile rural beauty from renewable-energy projects motivated by the dangers of global warming. I was especially struck by his talk, and challenged by it, because of its connection to controversies over wind power that are currently rending the environmental communities in both Ireland and Vermont.

I have long been, and continue to be, a passionate advocate of substituting renewable energy for fossil fuels. But Robinson's way of addressing the costs of such an approach helped me open my heart more fully to the concerns of Vermont neighbors with whom I disagreed about the installation of twenty-one wind turbines on a ridge in northern Vermont. His attention to loss in our rural regions' present and future as well as in our past also offered a more encompassing outlook on these wounded and recovering landscapes. Such a broad perspective suggested the possibility for respectful communication between what might have seemed sternly fortified counter-positions. Furthermore, coming so soon after the walk to Saint Colman's cave, his talk reverberated for me with the conflicting versions of Moya Cannon's story.

At the outset of his talk, Robinson described without reservation the crisis of climate change: "The globe is warming; we are facing into an era of floods, fires, famines; little doubt about it." Such direct acknowledgement of my own deepest

fears helped me to be more receptive to his main point. Namely, that renewable energy installations in Connemara were bringing "a great leap forward in the mechanization of the countryside, unparalleled since the Industrial Revolution." With reference to new modes of energy production being proposed by Ireland's Green Party, he said that, "Leaving aside the unavoidable pollution caused by their manufacture, transport, installation and decommissioning, they are in operation grossly visually polluting. And where they go, no one else can go. They mean locked gates, culverted streams, barbed wire, foregone hillsides. These are the spoil-heaps of wind-mining." Referring to climate change and the development of renewable energy at the industrial scale as two "ditches" between which we were now skidding, he asked ". . . how much of the world do we have to destroy in order to save it?" Robinson's question was not rhetorical—a salvo launched in order to score points in a debate. Rather, it described a stark dilemma—neither indulging in polemic nor proposing a solution. Robinson's talk struck me as being essentially a lamentation for changes in a beloved landscape.

In Vermont, debate over recent wind projects has not always been marked by respectful recognition of opponents' perspectives. I have been angered as a supporter of wind-energy by the tendency of some opponents to describe politicians and environmental groups supporting such installations as corrupt, and as complicit in the corporate machinations of major players like Québec's Gaz Metro. But my own hot disagreement with such arguments drew on feelings of distress far broader than the current controversy. Namely, the many

visible, and cumulative, changes in Vermont's climate and forests. It's equally true, though, that people who object to such installations feel wounded and betrayed by fellow environmentalists' apparent disregard of the ecological and scenic costs of erecting lines of massive wind turbines on largely undeveloped ridgelines. In addition, the alliance of our state agencies with a major Canadian utility company made them feel, as Meliboeus did, that their mountains of home had been expropriated by distant gods. This local story of polarization and regret was the context within which I listened to Tim Robinson's talk. It led me to speculate about whether, for a community as for an individual, shared grief might be able to offer a path beyond divisions.

One anecdote incorporated in Robinson's talk particularly struck me:

A few years ago I flew out to the Aran Islands to participate in a debate on a proposed windfarm there. On the same flight was a vigorous young enthusiast from an alternative technologies firm. When we extricated ourselves from the cramped little flying pram of a plane and stretched ourselves in the island breeze, which carried a thousand miles of ocean and a million wildflowers to our nostrils, he sniffed it and said with delectation, 'Ah! Kilowatt-hours!'

That comical but at the same time chilling story recalled a passage from Book X of *Paradise Lost*. Adam and Eve have fallen and are about to be expelled from the Garden of Eden. Labor, suffering, and mortality are the lot bequeathed to their descendants—which is to say, us. Just at this juncture in the

story, Sin and Death are following their father Satan into the newly fallen world, travelling on a highway that Death hammers out of the surrounding Chaos with his mace as they proceed. Like a vulture circling over the field where there is soon to be a battle, Milton writes, the "meager shadow" Death can already smell our unborn generations. We are for him just so many "living carcasses": ". . . with delight he snuffed the smell / Of mortal change on earth . . . / His nostril wide into the murky air, / Sagacious of his quarry from afar."

A scent in the air today foretells how the seasons and lands of vulnerable rural worlds may also soon be eaten up. Robinson's talk spoke both to those who are horrified by the impact of industrial scale wind turbines on delicate landscapes and fragile natural communities and to others transfixed by the evidence of Vermont's seasons, weather, and wildlife already being impaired by climate change, with the prospect of worse losses to come. Might we recently estranged Vermonters meet again at this keen edge of grief? The sorrow within Tim Robinson's talk in Galway helped defuse any impulse I might have had to charge furiously into the Vermont controversy over renewable energy. Instead, it prompted to me to ask whether we might find, if not unanimity, at least something approaching Silko's web of associated narratives. It rattled my controversial momentum, just as King Guaire's retainers came clanging to a halt before the hermit's cave. I returned to Vermont from this brief trip to the Burren and Galway prepared to walk forward quietly into our suffering landscape, in the company of neighbors whose passionate response to the new wind turbines might have seemed the opposite of my own.

↪ So it came to pass, on a morning in May, that I was climbing up to the Lowell ridgeline with Tom Slayton, whose commentary about the wind-controversy there for Vermont Public Radio had recently caught my attention. In calling for a moratorium on further renewable-energy developments on ridgelines, Slayton made a proposal with which I strongly differed. But he also conveyed his love of that landscape in a way devoid of scorn or polemic. His central point was that our sense of place in Vermont is inseparable from our unspoiled mountains. Like Robinson, he knew enough to take climate change very seriously; like him, he also feared that attempts to mitigate it might in some cases cause grave damage to the landscape we were trying to save. I have known and admired Tom Slayton for many years, and we arranged to go together to see the changes to the Lowell Mountains through each other's eyes.

We set out after breakfast from his home in Montpelier and drove to the Nelson Farm in its lovely hanging valley above the town of Albany. The construction areas for the project, on a portion of the Lowell Ridge directly above the Nelsons' pastures and ponds, are off-limits to the general public now. But the family had flagged a trail up through their sugarbush that still took us to where we could see the graveled terraces being constructed for each of the massive turbines. These were of course much more massive than the foundation for any house or barn. One anti-Lowell Wind activist had described them as looking like ancient sacrificial sites, with the mountain itself as the victim.

Most visible for residents in nearby towns like Craftsbury are the white, slowly turning blades of the turbines. I myself find them beautiful, a feeling reinforced by an urgent desire to see our state make a more significant turning of its own toward renewable energy. What is by far the more noticeable impact up on the ridgeline, however, is the gravel being thickly applied at locations that have been bulldozed, and sometimes blasted, level. Two other serious effects can readily be inferred even when not directly observed. One is the severing of wildlife corridors by these emphatic breaks in the canopy and on the forest floor, while the other is a disruption of springs feeding into the Black River watershed. These are grievous losses for the natural fabric of our region. I must hold them in my mind, balancing my constant awareness that the sugar maples dominating those upper woods and anchoring its ecosystem will be among the first species eradicated if the next decade brings no substantial abatement of the carbon flowing into our planet's atmosphere. The lacy hemlocks gracing the ridges' rivulets will also certainly disappear.

Though the morning began bright and dry, rain was spattering down on us by the time we hiked back out of those woods in the early afternoon. Such shifting weather created a refreshing breeze that drew up the slope throughout our hike, giving us a respite from the mosquitoes and deer flies that can sometimes make exploring Vermont's woods during the late spring and early summer a frantic experience. After arriving at the ridgeline, we had timidly transgressed the heavily marked boundaries, stepping into a grey world across which trucks

sped and heavy earth-movers rumbled. After gazing at this activity in silence for a few minutes, we turned our steps downhill again toward the Nelsons' farm.

Because of the recent completion of one cycle of federal funding for such renewable energy projects, we may soon have an *economically* determined moratorium on more major installations for the foreseeable future. If that happens, lovers of the Vermont landscape must make of this an opportunity to move beyond our disagreements and assess the ecological and social costs (both here and elsewhere) of petroleum, coal, natural gas, hydro, and nuclear generation, as well as of emerging renewable technologies. Since all of them do have costs, and serious ones, we should also redouble our efforts at conservation and revisit our policies in the areas of housing, education, agriculture, and transportation with energy use in mind. In order to avoid a fatal skid into either of Tim Robinson's two ditches, this would be a good time to stop the speeding car and take a walk together as we deliberate about our alternatives. Inhabitants of North America, Europe and the Pacific Rim, especially, need to reconsider our profligate ways. Some of the most devastating impacts of climate change have come to impoverished populations, like those in Bangladesh and the mountains of Pakistan, who bear essentially no responsibility for global warming. Bill McKibben, after focusing on such injustices in his book *Eaarth*, concludes by urging that we learn "to live on the world we've created—lightly, carefully, gracefully."

↪ As we walked away from the sounds of heavy machinery we stopped from time to time to admire some of the early wildflowers in the woods. The dominant color was white—the brilliant white petals of bunchberry, the delicate sprays of Canada Mayflower and foamflower. All along our path arose blackberry brambles too with their own profusion of white petals. I was reminded by them of the strong affinity between traditional music in western Ireland and in our part of New England, with "Blackberry Blossom" being one tune cherished in both places. I also thought about another white flower blooming at the edge of our Vermont woods in this season. Shadblow. I had been eying it all spring.

When shadblow blossoms in May, it marks Vermont's long-awaited turning from the long weeks of mud season toward the delicacy, color, and brevity of spring. A native of our region, shadblow (*Amelanchier canadensis*) most often appears around here as a leggy tree of twelve to twenty feet in height, growing in sparse woods or beside wet ground. Like those of apples and many other members of the rose family, its flowers have five white petals. But these are so slender and delicate that the crown of a tree in full blossom looks less like a cloud than like a drift of smoke—clinging together for just a moment before dissipating. To a hiker, or to a distracted driver who happens to glance from a car window at the right time, a flowering shadblow is all the more arresting because of its lovely recessiveness. Its emotional impact is less reminiscent of

a trumpet-peal or a sudden shaft of light than of a mysterious, lingering scent.

The tree's name reflects its association with the annual migration of shad up the rivers of New England. Shad are anadromous, like salmon: they hatch in fresh water, but then spend most of their adult lives, and also reproduce, in the ocean. Just as the shadblow open, these namesake fish are beginning to return inland, after six or seven years in the salt, so that they can spawn in their native streams. This correlation between the flowering world and an ancient, dramatic migration prevails all the way from southeastern Canada down the mid-Atlantic coast. Over much of that range it also parallels the distinctive skein of bedrock shared by western Ireland, the Maritimes, and the northern Appalachians. Such a continuity among widely separated bioregions reflects the fact that, just as the blossoming is keyed to air temperature, so too the timing of anadromous fishes' migration relates closely to rising temperatures in the freshwater systems to which they are returning. As is true of so many ecological associations, this one between shad and shadblow mirrors a larger concord of climatic and chemical factors.

For both the indigenous Western Abenaki and the European settlers who put down roots in New England about four centuries years ago, the sudden arrival of these plentiful and delicious fish could not have come at a better time of year. Early spring has historically been a hungry season in the North, with the previous harvest largely exhausted, deer moving back up into the remote heights, and new crops just being planted. Reaching weights of four to ten pounds, shad are the largest

members of the herring family, so that their value as a nutritional resource at this straitened moment in the calendar has been enormous. Both native communities and settlers could eat their fill, dry some fish for the future, and use still others to enrich the soil of fields beside the rivers. Attaching the fish's name to the tree thus expressed both hunger and hope in a flinty land where starvation was often a real danger.

Serviceberry is a second name used interchangeably with shadblow. Some scholars have traced it to the resemblance between this North American species and European members of the rose family that are called *Sorbus* in the Linnaean system and have been known as *sarviss* in the British Isles. Accordingly, serviceberry is often taken to be a corruption of its original New England name of sarvissberry. Be that as it may, New Englanders have also developed another deep connection between the name serviceberry and an aspect of local natural history as specific and significant as the timing of the shad run. Frosts extend deep into the soil here. When the white petals of shadblow appear, that has traditionally been taken to show that the ground has finally thawed enough for families to bury their winter's dead. The name serviceberry signals the possibility for long-deferred funeral services as eloquently as the name shadblow does the reappearance of shad in their native streams. Both speak to the ways in which recurrent natural phenomena have become both personally and culturally meaningful in this challenging landscape.

More recently, though, there is apprehensiveness connected with such seasonal modulations. Ecological disruptions, and in particular climate change, make of these two species gauges

not just for the turning of the seasons and the continuation of our lives, but also for disruption in the living systems on which we depend. Starting in the late nineteenth century and continuing until fairly recently, the shad run was eliminated in most of northern New England. First came a wave of clear-cutting, including on the slopes of steep mountain valleys, that deposited enough silt in the streams to suppress many populations of fish. Then dams were built throughout southern New England for the purposes of powering mills, diverting water to cities for drinking, and controlling flooding. An unintended consequence of damming was the creation of barriers preventing anadromous species from making their ways back up many of their native streams. Emerging technologies were thus disrupting migrations that had been vital to human beings in this region for thousands of years.

An equally dramatic development in the last couple of decades, however, has been the reintroduction of shad to Vermont and our neighboring states. The water quality in our streams has been improved by policies that limit agricultural runoff as well as encourage hedge-rows and riparian fencing in order to impede erosion and limit cattle's ability to walk into fragile brooks. State environmental agencies have taken the lead in releasing fry into headwaters that traditionally supported shad, mandating removal of some dams altogether, and installing more effective fish ladders in those that are allowed to remain. Though the numbers of returning fish are still in the tens of thousands rather than the millions found at the time of European settlement, there is reason to hope that they may recover more substantially when the fish hatched a few years

ago in restocked streams begin to make their way back to them from the sea.

The return of shad to Vermont—like the return of peregrine falcons to our family's own town of Bristol, thanks to Rachel Carson's leadership in restricting agricultural applications of DDT—inspires feelings of chastened hope. An awareness of ecological fragility in the face of human carelessness is coupled with experiences of reversing such damage through scientifically informed efforts of restoration. The return of iconic species like shad and peregrines reinforces our potential for a deeper sense of emotional, ethical, and social affiliation with our home landscapes.

The particular associations of the name serviceberry, however, continue to make it too a challenging seasonal marker now that climate change has had such a severe impact at our northerly latitude. Disastrous floods struck valleys to the east of the Green Mountains in the wake of 2011's Tropical Storm Irene, while the transition from winter to spring was so unseasonal and intermittent in 2012 as to truncate the sugaring season. Temperatures climbed into the eighties in early March and trees began to leaf weeks earlier than usual. This meant that when the temperatures dropped again at the end of that month, the sap was no longer sweet enough to boil down into delectable syrup. Many family-scale producers, like our own Maggie Brook operation, made barely a third of the usual crop. When the shadblow blossomed and frozen country roads became muddy and rutted, we had long since pulled our taps. What had historically been a marker of predictable transition, in other words, now felt like a token of loss, another

disorienting and discouraging manifestation, like the dimming of our colors when the fall foliage came, of living in an unmoored world.

↪ The tune in my ears now, as I draw together in memory these hikes with friends in the Burren and the Northeast Kingdom, is Liz Carroll's "Island of Woods." The long history and ancient tonalities of Irish music, as represented by a tune like "Langstrom Pony," continue to renew themselves through compositions by contemporary musicians steeped in the traditional idiom. Josie McDermott served as an intermediary for Catherine McEvoy, and her students around the world, between the musical heritage her immigrant parents had borne with them and the Birmingham in which she grew up. Carroll, the daughter herself of Irish immigrants, has contributed powerful new tunes to this tradition from her home in Chicago. Among her many celebrated compositions, one of the most beloved is "Island of Woods."

It's a tune Rita and I heard for the first time at one of the small, informal sessions in Jonathan Leonard's airy living room. Though we share a sufficient core of tunes, it quite often happens that just a couple of musicians out of a group of eight or nine will play a set that only they know. It makes for a pleasant rhythm to lean forward to perform, then sit back to enjoy someone else's favorite tunes. "Island of Woods" was introduced in this context by Maria Wicker and Carolyn Buckley, two talented flute players in the circle. Their sweet tone, fluid rolls, and artfully sustained notes magnified the sad beauty of a

tune that begins with a descent through the notes D, C#, B, with the B prolonged before going down over and over to an A that is played four times before finally settling on low D to end the phrase. It feels as if the melody has sunk under weighty emotional gravity from which it can't easily escape. Then almost the identical heartbreaking strain is played again, but this time going *up* repeatedly from the A to a B. To my ear, the contrast between those first repeated notes and the second sequence that shifts the repetitions up a single tone establishes the character of the whole piece. Like the substitution of C-natural for C# in "Langstrom Pony," this deliberate and highly noticeable choice reinforces the presence of a countercurrent near the end of the tune. In the second half of the tune's A-part the melody slides up to a high G before descending forcefully, by way of repeated D-C#-A triplets, to the lower E that grounds the tune.



LINK: *Island of Woods*

Here's what it sounds like.

"Island of Woods" was so simple and compelling that it went straight to our hearts. Maria and Carolyn told us that if we wanted to learn it we could just check out one of the many versions on YouTube featuring performances by Liz Carroll herself. She was often accompanied in such videos by guitar players, including the remarkable John Doyle. One of the aspects of her playing that made these renditions so powerful was her remarkable emphasis on the repetitions we had already noticed at the session. Rather than simply moving deliberately through the reiterated notes, she leaned into them dramatically—seeming almost to give way to those first heavy A's and B's before forging on. In connection with one of these performances, Carroll

remarks that “Island of Woods” is an ancient name for Ireland, though she goes on to add that today a different name like “Land of Green Pastures” might be more fitting. In Ireland, as in Scotland, almost all the forests were destroyed long ago. Both the ship-building Vikings who settled on that island so early and the British Navy were avid for the famous Irish oaks, while centuries of grazing sheep guaranteed that the razed woods would not be returning.

As I’ve commented more than once, it’s important to press lightly on the names of Irish tunes, many of which seem either whimsical or downright baffling. But in this case, especially given Liz Carroll’s own comments, it’s hard to avoid feeling the relevance of her title to the endangered forests of Vermont. They have recovered strongly both from the clear-cutting that made Vermont an ecological wasteland in the early nineteenth century and from the sheep industry that briefly flourished thereafter. But today climate change ensures that the forests as we have known them will not survive.

Hiking in the Lowell Range with Tom Slayton I kept hearing the echoes of those first three descending notes in “Island of Woods.” Were they a lamentation, a eulogy? What tunes might they flow into next in this landscape of loss so much vaster than the span of human mortality? Though the rhythm of “Island of Woods” seems almost to falter in those opening phrases, it then recovers the stately tempo of a slow reel and the triplets with which it finishes feel defiant. What the music tells us is that those vanished forests may at least still flourish in our hearts, *and in this tune.*

Music is required if we are to move forward resolutely, in

the face of challenges that first make us falter, and in order to foster community when disagreements push neighbors apart. How else has Ireland endured such a history? We require, today, an activism that sings of what it loves. When hiking through Vermont’s woods in late fall I have often recalled Frost’s “Reluctance,” which ends with this stanza:

*Ah, when to the heart of man
Was it ever less than a treason
To go with the drift of things,
To yield with a grace to reason,
And bow and accept the end
Of a love or a season?*

I understand that impulse to resist even unavoidable change, lest too ready an acceptance seem a betrayal. But, as the poet himself comes to affirm over the half-century of his writing that follows this poem, our only choice is finally to move forward into the next season while doing our best to serve and celebrate what we hold most dear.

↪ Disruption of ecological sequences that were once attuned to what Linnaeus called “the floral calendar” is one of the griefs of climate instability. But beloved flowers do continue to return, offering gauges not only for what we have lost but also for what endures, and what may be restored. Such recovery will neither be quick nor complete but it may nonetheless orient us to a more sustainable vision of community with what David

Abram has called the more-than-human world. Even when spring slips out of kilter, the flowering world can help us to affirm the bonds of love when we might otherwise have fallen mute. In "Flowers at Loughcrew," from her collection *Hands*, Moya Cannon reflects on the fossil pollen found at prehistoric burial sites, with its evidence that flowers have immemorially solemnized and adorned our relinquishment of the dead. Such discoveries show that the blossoming world has long lifted up our narrative of loss, making of it "our ceremony of grief / attended by what is most beautiful, / most fragrant on this earth."

This shuttle of dread and hope reminds me of Tim Robinson's resonant description of Connemara's "foregone hillsides." "Foregone" is one of those words that looks both backward and forward. Such hillsides are already in the past for Robinson, their delicate beauty extinguished by massive industrialization. But "foregone" can also refer to the future, the dictionary tells us—as in the phrase "a foregone conclusion." Severe and challenging climate change is at this point inevitable. It is equally certain, given the much greater diffuseness of non-fossil resources, that efforts to harvest renewable sources of energy will be at a scale alarming to many lovers of rural regions. There will be no easy solution to our present crisis.

Grief does not guarantee that people will arrive at a creative response to loss, but it does hold open such a possibility. For this reason, I incline toward the perhaps less canonical reading of Saint Colman and the Road of the Dishes, in which hostile warriors are halted in their tracks

and then baptized. When the horses of anger are jerked to a stop under bewildering circumstances, there can be an opportunity for "conversion," turning together from our adamant agendas toward awareness of the turning earth. For those famished riders making their way up to the saint's cave, the swerve from intention created an unexpected space for deeper encounter. As serviceberry has long shown, spring can be a time for renewal as well as grief, with both emotions enacted in the single action of burying the winter's dead. Such a unitary accomplishment may well be harder to achieve now, as we search out new connections between our human projects and the disrupted but still flowering world. In both Ireland and Vermont, we will have to falter together toward a collective narrative grounded in memory and the land. Only by reconciling conflicting stories of our place and relinquishing the satisfactions of blame and righteousness will we be able to sustain ourselves as communities in a shadowed time.