IMPERFECTLY SILENT: NAVIGATING THE UNSPOKEN IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH WOMEN'S WRITING

by

Madeline McCormack

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Karen Steele, Ph.D.

Department of English

A. Layne Craig, Ph.D

Department of English

ABSTRACT

The following paper seeks to answer the question of how do Irish women authors engage with the historical violences inflicted on Irish women and lasting legacies of trauma in the post-Celtic Tiger era to counteract deeply engrained social silences? Inspired by Kevin Quashie's theory of "Black aliveness," I argue that Claire Keegan, Eimear McBride, and Caitriona Lally in their respective writings *Small Things Like These, A Girl is a Half-formed Thing,* and *Eggshells* represent the relation of being in their texts to assert the quality of aliveness possessed by Irish women in spite of legacies of abuse informed by patriarchal violence.

Introduction

In 2008, following a period of tremendous economic prosperity known as the Celtic Tiger, the Irish Republic experienced an especially devastating economic crash. Prior to the crash, Ireland saw incredibly rapid economic development beginning in the mid-1990s, allowing it to rise to being one of the most economically prosperous nations in Europe. The era was characterized by its emphasis on foreign investment, with 90% of Ireland's exports coming from foreign-owned companies, according to Gerry Smyth (133). The Celtic Tiger, a play on the Asian Tigers, four Asian nations that experienced rapid economic growth and development in the mid to late 1900s, saw a massive boom in employment opportunities for women in Ireland, with the female working population rising from 39 percent to over 50 percent between 1994 and 2002 (Kennedy 96). Despite this, women still faced pay gaps and gender discrimination within the workforce, reflecting sentiments that are still present today.

The economic policies that contributed to the Celtic Tiger boom came at the expense of the Ireland's marginalized populations, who were most impacted by the post-Tiger recession. In "Adjusting Men and Abiding Mammies," Diane Negra examines the gendering of the economic crisis, explaining that reactions to recessionary joblessness prioritize sympathy for men's job losses and place women as domestic consumers (25). Soon after the fall of the Celtic Tiger, Irish media began framing men as the true victims of the recession, their destabilized masculinity reaffirmed through the assertion of femininity's frivolities. In a recessionary culture that privileges masculinity, women's writing creates a space for the complication of such gendered constructions of the Celtic Tiger, as argued by Claire Bracken and Tara Harney-Mahajan in "A Continuum of Irish Women's Writing: Reflections on the Post-Celtic Tiger Era" (2). Women's

writing post-Tiger centers the explorations of women characters and their interactions with marginalizations made especially visible following the era of the Celtic Tiger.

The rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger occurred concurrently with a national reckoning with the Catholic Church's role in the mass abuse of Irish women and children, primarily through Magdalene Laundries, Industrial Schools, and cases of priest pedophilia. The Church, the "principal moral force" in Ireland, had been covering up such practices through establishing itself as an "'independent' organization operating freely within the state," and was able to side-step state sanctions (Smyth 134). Such revelations contributed to the disrupting of the Church's reputation and power in Ireland, destabilizing Irish national identity. In the wake of parallel moments, Ireland had to contend with how to both continue moving forwards and seek justice for the past. In response, Smyth asks a fundamental question: "what does it mean – what can it mean – to be Irish in the wake of the Celtic Tiger?" (136).

To answer such a question, one can turn to the works of Irish women novelists post-Celtic Tiger. The destabilization caused by the fall of the Celtic Tiger allowed for an emergence of literature focused on giving voice to the marginalized and making sense of the systemic violences inflicted upon women and children in Ireland's recent history, dubbed the architecture of containment by James M. Smith. He cites that widespread abuse was able to continue unconfronted due to the work of independent institutions, including mother and baby homes, industrial schools, and Magdelene Laundries, bolstered by legislative actions set in place after the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 aimed at policing "perceived sexual immorality":

> [State actors] disembodied sexual practice by obscuring social realities, especially illegitimacy, in discursive abstractions. And they concealed sexual crime, especially rape,

> infanticide, and abuse, while simultaneously sexualizing the women and children unfortunate enough to fall victim to society's moral proscriptions…Finally, it helped to engineer widespread public consent by way of the legislative agenda, even while the operative functions of the institutional response to sexual practice were shrouded in secrecy. (Smith 2-3)

The greater Irish public too found itself participating in the architecture of containment, cooperating with the state in incarcerating deviant women and children.

Since 2008, Post-Celtic Tiger, Irish women authors have centered characters of marginalized backgrounds in order to reckon with silenced histories of abuse and violence. Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These* (2021)*,* Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* (2013)*,* and Caitriona Lally's *Eggshells* (2015) all explore gendered and bodily violence through the actions of deeply traumatized and marginalized characters. Their depictions of deeply marginalized and traumatized characters serves give a voice to the unspeakable. Keegan, Lally, and McBride's characters have suffered under tremendous, unspoken cycles of abuse which are confronted only through their participation in close, interpersonal relationships. Through their works, these authors point to the power the collective, greater society has reinforcing the taboo, which the traumatized main characters can only work against through their reliance on other marginalized and traumatized individuals. It is through these bonds that questioning of the architecture of containment occurs.

In their struggle to engage with the depth of abuse and bodily violence against women in recent Irish history, these contemporary texts reveal that reading for the trauma and abuse of the characters cannot contribute to the larger work of righting the wrongs committed against the marginalized in Ireland. Instead, I believe these authors are asking readers to consider the life of

the marginalized, as I draw on scholar Kevin Quashie's theories of Black aliveness. In his book *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*, Quashie considers the act of Black worldmaking, as he posits through his analysis of Black poetry and essays that "in thinking through a black world, I am trying to surpass terror as the uninflected language of black being, as well as to suspend the anti/ante position of blackness. In that surpassing and suspending, I am trying to articulate the aesthetics of aliveness" (9-10). He recognizes the unique way Black poets and thinkers engage with the world through their imagining of spaces and relationships that uplift their own aliveness rather than reflecting narratives of death or pessimism, ultimately serving as a means for survival, stating that "when black literary characters say 'I' or 'you,' they can also mean 'one'; that when black speakers speak, they are in pursuit of the oneness that is of a human being philosophically oriented to a problem that is theirs to pursue. Even when they seem to be speaking toward the audience of antiblackness, their furious doings could be read for what they mean to the one of black being" (Quashie 147).

In my consideration of Quashie's theories on Black aliveness, I do not intend to disregard the historical significance of theorizing on Black personhood and experiences. Rather, I believe that Quashie's complication of what it means to consider life and aliveness in resistance to positioning realities in relation to death can be extended to considerations of Irish narratives of struggle. Irish women authors similarly grapple with what it means to survive, and reading for the moments and acts of resistance and the centering of life present in the text is crucial in understanding how to break the silence. We as readers and social actors cannot continue to focus on the act of abuse and must instead turn our gaze to the aliveness of the marginalized. It is in these moments that resistance is made possible, however small. The works of Keegan, McBride, and Lally all demonstrate that life can and should take precedent over the narrative of trauma.

Interchapter—Magdelene Laundries and Female Incarceration

For most of the twentieth century, Magdalene Laundries served as the dominant strategy for families, the Church, and the state to deal with Ireland's "deviant" women: those who were suggested to be incapable of moral rehabilitation and salvation, as I explain below. A woman can be understood as deviant for her transgression of sexual norms, including having a child out of wedlock. Such institutions functioned through a state and Church co-operative practice, establishing the Church's authority in the incarceration of young girls and women. Residents within the Magdelene institution worked with no compensation, providing the institution with free and forced labor. The young girls and women incarcerated within often faced strict and harsh conditions. As described by Miriam Haughton, Mary McAuliffe and Emilie Pine in "Commemoration, Gender, and the Postcolonial Carceral State," in the introduction to their book *Legacies of the Magdalen Laundries: Commemoration, Gender, and the Postcolonial Carceral State*,

> Individuality and freedom of expression were ruthlessly suppressed; most survivors speak about the loss of names and identities. Women and girls were forced to wear shapeless uniforms, had their hair cropped or shaved, and were often given a new name, a house name, or a number, on entering the Laundry. Punishments for even minor infractions were swift and often harsh, ranging from bread-and-water diets to physical punishments. Although, in theory, the women had the right to leave, they were not told of this. (Haughton et al. 9)

Unlike other prisons of the time period, such as industrial schools and mother and baby homes, Magdalene laundries existed outside the scope of the criminal justice system, as they did not receive state funding and could thus resist official regulations, as emphasized by James M. Smith

in *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (46). Additionally, the success of Magdalene institutions relied on the state's cooperation, as maintaining Ireland's image of a nation of moral purity necessitated a carceral institution to reprimand those who threatened the Irish state's legitimacy through their own moral impurity.

The general public's knowledge of and silence surrounding the Magdalene laundries' operations allowed the institutions to often incarcerate women for life. The institutions existed in plain sight, utilizing a culture of fear and dependence to maintain their authority. The laundries served the local populations, as "[l]ocal homes, businesses, and individuals used the services of the Laundry, and local businesses would also have supplied food and other necessities to it" (Haughton et al. 10). The Laundries provided an economic support system to the local populations, creating a system of dependency which could not easily be broken. Additionally, Magdalene institutions carried out their operations in plain sight through the atmosphere of fear they cultivated surrounding women's incarceration and wrong doing. In the words of Haughton et al., "[a]s well as incarcerating girls and women who were presumed to have transgressed moral and sexual codes, the physical presence of Magdalen Laundries also served as a warning to women 'on the outside' that punishments for moral or sexual 'sins' could and would be swift and punitive" (10).

To maintain legitimacy as spaces for transgressive women, these institutions developed a response that effectively segregated Irish women into two classes, emphasizing the need for separate forms of incarceration for separate types of unmarried mothers. The first class of woman were those who could benefit from spiritual reclamation, and thus could be sent to mother and baby homes operated by Catholic sisterhoods and funded by state and local authorities (Smith 48). These women needed to be separated from lower classes of unmarried

mothers, as in the eyes of the Catholic Church, they were most at risk of being influenced by moral impurity. The second class of unmarried mother was deemed “hopeless” and a source of moral contagion, thus requiring incarceration within Magdalene asylums for both their own self-protection and the protection of the greater Irish society (Smith 48). These women, being repeat offenders, could not be rehabilitated and instead were subject to confinement as a result of their transgressions.

Additionally, in “Reflections on Ireland’s ‘Home(s)’: Shame, Stigma, and Grievability,” Clara Fischer highlights how “shame was mobilized in the pursuit of a postcolonial national identity, which centrally hinged on the moral purity of women, on the one hand, but was promoted and maintained alongside constructions of women and women’s potential sexual transgressions as continuous threats to that identity, on the other” (824). If all women are potential transgressors, it becomes significantly easier to justify their incarceration. As a result of the Catholic Church and Irish state’s deployment of shame to maintain the national image, women began monitoring their own behaviors, fearing repercussions, while justifying the treatment of those confined within the walls of the Laundry.

Though the doors of the final Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes of Ireland closed their doors toward the end of the twentieth century, their legacies have continued to reverberate well into the twenty-first century. Reports such as the 2013 McAleese report on the Magdalene Laundries and the 2017 Mother and Baby Home Commission Report gave tremendous insight into the horrors inflicted on the young women and babies undergoing institutionalization. The Mother and Baby Home Commission report confirmed that the deaths of 796 children at the Taum Mother and Baby Home were improperly or entirely undocumented,

with their bodies being placed in an underground septic tank serving as an unofficial mass grave (Fischer 144).

In early 1984, soon after the passing of a referendum within the Irish constitution banning abortion, the death of Ann Lovett and the Kerry babies scandal occurred within months of each other, as Moira J. Maguire describes in "The Changing Face of Catholic Ireland: Conservatism and Liberalism in the Ann Lovett and Kerry Babies Scandals" (336). Ann Lovett, a fifteen year-old girl in Granard, died after giving birth to a still-born baby at the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary in January 1983. After probing from national newspapers, it was eventually discovered that many people in the town were aware of Lovett's pregnancy; however, her family's position as outsiders allowed the wider community an excuse not to interfere. In the wake of national news coverage interrogating the town's ignorance and passivity in allowing Lovett, a young girl, to die in childbirth, the local newspapers maintained that Granard being the site of such a death was not unique, reinforcing a rhetoric that "Lovett's death could have happened in any town in Ireland where the image of Catholic piety was valued more highly than the Christian principles of compassion and tolerance" (Maguire 342). Further, the death of an unwed mother at the feet of another unwed mother revered by the Church is deeply symbolic of the hypocrisies entrenching Catholicism.

Soon after the widespread national media coverage of Lovett's death, the body of a newborn baby washed ashore in County Kerry. A widespread search for a recently-pregnant woman who could be the mother ensued, eventually identifying Joanna Hayes as the most likely suspect, as she had been pregnant and was admitted to the hospital after giving birth the same day the unidentified baby was found on the shore (Maguire 345). In reality, Hayes had miscarried and buried her baby on her own land; however, she eventually confessed under

coercion to the murder of the Kerry baby. Although the remains of her baby were eventually found on her land, the gardai attempted to find fault in Hayes, creating a narrative that Haynes had been pregnant with twins, which she murdered and buried at different times and places (Maguire 346). Although the authorities had no substantial evidence to support Hayes's guilt, Irish catholic society felt "[s]he was immediately suspect, as an unmarried mother and adulterer, and even if she did not murder the Cahirciveen baby, she was no "innocent"; she could be sacrificed in the name of law, order, and morality" (Maguire 346). Both the case of Ann Lovett and that of the Kerry Babies were significantly featured in national discourse, informing future perceptions of Catholic moral authority, pregnancy, and women's rights in respect to their bodies and privacy.

Chapter 1

Why were the things that were closest so often the hardest to see?

— Claire Keegan, *Small Things Like These*

Claire Keegan's 2021 novella *Small Things Like These* interrogates the legacies of Magdalene Laundries in its depictions of bystanders and questioning what it means to make a difference, centering the narrative around a small town and the influence of the Catholic Church in 1985. Bill Furong, the novella's protagonist, spends the course of the novel grappling with his own participation in and subjugation by the policing of young women's sexuality. In an interview following her longlisting for the 2022 Booker Prize, Keegan outlines her goals for the novella:

> I didn't want to set it in a time before motor vehicles because that would suggest it was something of the distant past, not a society of my own generation's making. If it was set in another time, it might not have allowed me to question and criticise the society we ourselves created, our current misogynies and fear, the cowardices and silences and perversities and survival tactics of my own generation.

Small Things Like These takes place in the wake of such national discussions. However, the novella also takes place in a time not so far from our own, one in which the reader can more easily situate themselves. The community's dependence on Magdalene Laundries as well as its failure to protect and support women occurred only a generation ago. To position such a story in a time that exists within the living memory of many Irish readers is to remind the reader of the importance of confronting such events of incarceration abuse, as these events are not a distant past, but take up a space of one's own life time. The lives lost during the time of the Magdelene laundries are still being uncovered today, as Keegan notes in the closing pages of *Small Things*

Like These: “Earlier this year [2021], the Mother and Baby Home Commission Report found that nine thousand children died in just eighteen of the institutions investigated” (116). Addressing the biases against women that are still present today is a critical part of repairing the damages produced by Magdalene laundries.

Critics such as Gareth Cornwell and Donna Lynn Tillotson emphasize the novella’s exploration of collective violence and silence in its narrative. In the article “Claire Keegan’s *Small Things Like These* (2021) as an Existentialist Fable,” Cornwell describes Furlong’s method of deep introspection as a representation of existentialism, claiming “His restive spirit, expressive of a mild form of alienation, seems to derive from a residual awareness that things are not, or should not be, necessarily just so; that a different life might be possible as a result of some as yet unimaginable change” (54). Furlong’s life lacks control, and his practice of deep thinking serves as a means of taking back control and make sense of the patriarchal violences informing his existence. In Tillotson’s article “*Small Things Like These* and the Novella as Intervention,” she explains Keegan’s use of historical critique and the form of novella rather than novel allows a close and personal examination of the collective silences and abuses that formed the lives of young women incarcerated within Magdelene institutions. Tillotson states, “Keegan’s novella enacts a metaleptic intervention, collapsing the boundary between historical record and moral imagination, compelling readers to inhabit the ethical dilemmas themselves and confront the consequences of silence and complicity” (60). Both the arguments of Cornwell and Tillotson underscore the necessity of deep empathy as a means of processing violence and resisting marginalization, supporting a reading of *Small Things Like These* that centers Keven Quashie’s theory of aliveness as a means of preventing the reduction of Irish women to their trauma.

During the Christmas season of 1985, Bill Furlong, the protagonist of Claire Keegan's *Small Things Like These*, finds himself forced out of his comfortable distance from New Ross when he finds a young, unmarried mother named Sarah locked in a coal shed on the property of a local convent. Furlong, himself the product of illegitimacy, spends the majority of the novella trying to understand his own role in Sarah's continued incarceration. As we learn, both Bill and Sarah have been marginalized and subjected to social ostracism due to their proximity to patriarchal violence. Throughout *Small Things Like These*, Keegan depicts the complexity of a community collectively shamed and silenced, drawing on criticisms of the Church's maintenance of moral authority and the incarceration of young women and girls to underscore the urgency of disrupting the social order by acknowledging and countering the often-obscured legacies of community failure to protect young women. Keegan's novella is deeply invested in the question of what does it take to act against an environment demanding silence, and why is it Furlong who does so. I believe, as I argue in this chapter, that Furlong differs from the rest of the town as he is a man drawn to remembering and imagining, allowing him to invest himself fully in the aliveness of Sarah. Other figures in the town, including townspeople and religious authorities, contrast from Furlong in that they are so blinded by fear, shame and, prejudice that they rely on the comfort of women's marginalization as a sign that they will remain protected. They cannot envision anything different and therefore cannot enact change, whereas Furlong's proximity to Sarah's suffering and thoughtful nature allows him to realize a future centering Sarah's life and being, revealing the interconnected nature of Irish patriarchal violence and aliveness.

Rumors abound about the local convent and laundry in New Ross. Some theories of the townspeople, indicated by the narrator, place the girls inside as "girls of low character" working hard to clean the linens of the laundry's clients in return for redemption of their sins. Other

theories speculate that the nuns are the ones doing the work, while even further theories identify the laundry as a home for "common, unmarried girls… hidden away after they had given birth" while their babies are adopted out overseas (41-42). Regardless of the rumor, word of the function of the laundry has leaked into the ears of the wider population. The open secret of the laundry, knowing and speaking of without truly acknowledging, allows the community a comfortable distance away from the abuse and lets them deflect blame and ignore their complicity. The townsfolk are aware of the harsh realities hidden behind the walls of the laundry and have deployed gossip as a way to confront the truth while remaining safe from any potential repercussions arising from negative talk of the Church. Such abuses are obscured from the public eye just enough to make ignorance seem like simply a lack of knowledge; while everyone in town knows, or at least speculates as to what is truly happening, continued support of the laundry by the major power structures of the town can be supported by reasonable doubt that such abuses are even occurring in the first place. After all, discussion of malpractice taking place within the laundry is characterized as the work of "idle minds" and "gossips," which should generally be taken with a grain of salt. Now, those with the least to lose from pulling their support of the Church can continue to reap the benefits of a structure operating due to the silence of the powerful. To withdraw support of the laundry would be to acknowledge the part they play in upholding the structures of oppression that allow the laundry to thrive. Such silences are proof that the structures of the town are functioning as they should.

New Ross has been tremendously impacted by the economic depression; businesses are either downsizing or closing, paying the bills has become a question, and even "and early one morning, Furlong had seen a young schoolboy drinking milk out of the cat's bowl behind the priest's house" (13). People are starving, but the one place in town that is still well-off is the

Church. The priest is still able to spare milk to feed stray cats, and the nuns at St Margaret's run the best school in town. The Church plays a large role in the development of the town; specifically, it employs Furlong's fuel business and the its laundry prepares the linens of many around town. It also is evident that major operations in the town that support the laundry do so without regard to the rumors, as the laundry continues to have a "good reputation," and of the potential clients the laundry could have, "restaurants and guesthouses, the nursing home and the hospital and all the priests and well-off households sent their washing there" (40). Despite the rumors circulating about the treatment of the girls working within the walls of the laundry, those who are well-off continue to benefit from its services. Each group that seeks out the laundry's services does so while remaining complicit in the abuses occurring. The Church also serves as a major source of education for the young girls living in New Ross. In addition to these contributions, the the Church is a light in the darkness, and thus, when it crosses the line, all must avert their eyes so as to not cause trouble for themselves. Silence functions as a form of self-preservation for the people of New Ross. Furlong risks getting himself into trouble as he becomes more questioning of the actions and role of the Church in New Ross. As Furlong's actions become more obvious to the other members of the town, Mrs Kehoe wishes him a wise warning: "these nuns have a finger in every pie" (99). The Church is an extraordinary influential source of power in the town, which remains behind the scenes and invisible unless one goes looking for it. It extends its influence into a variety of aspects of life, meaning that if someone were to stick their nose where it isn't wanted, such as Furlong has, they risk upending their good fortunes in more areas than just in their position within the Church.

With his background as the son of a poor, unmarried mother, Furlong has had his fair share of judgment and maltreatment from other people while growing up, lasing well into

adulthood. In school, Furlong was treated poorly by the other children who called him names and bullied him to the point that “once, he’d come home with the back of his coat covered in spit” (7). Even as children, the students have been made familiar with the social stigmas that come with socially deviant women and make no effort to extend sympathy to Furlong. His only saving grace is his association with the Big House, which offers Furlong “some leeway, and protection” (7). The Big House, occupied by Mrs. Wilson, is a remnant from the Anglo-Irish ascendancy’s consolidation of political and economic power during the colonization of Ireland. The particular phrasing of Furlong’s “leeway” from harm indicates that Furlong’s relationship with Mrs. Wilson and her wealth are not enough to shield him from abuse; it is as if the children are saying, “We’ll look the other way–just this once.” Mrs. Wilson’s status as a war widow garners sympathy and support from the people of the town. Mrs. Wilson, a Protestant, still continues to benefit from centuries of power as a member of a lineage of the landholding class throughout the colonization of Ireland, and Furlong’s association with her shield him from some of the worst abuses a child could inflict.

An illegitimate child, such as Furlong himself, is the physical evidence of a woman who has transgressed. A child born out of wedlock who has been raised in a community that knows their mother’s truths can never be separated from the shame of their mother’s deviance. An illegitimate child is proof that the social system and moral codes have not done their job correctly, and the mother and the result must both be punished, as they are the two physical reminders of transgression. Furlong’s illegitimacy is an unforgivable sin, but his connection to the Big House has granted him a second chance, or rather that the children are willing to turn the other way for the time being. Any interpretation of the school children’s gift of “leeway,” however, implies that a serious crime has been committed, and Furlong is not to believe that he

is exempt from punishment. That the young children have been made to understand that Furlong is equally as guilty as his mother for her transgressions speaks to the severity of her actions in this small town run by the Catholic Church. Even years after his mother's death, Furlong is subject to scorn: "…when he'd gone into the registry office for a copy of his birth certificate, *Unknown* was all that was written in the space where his father's name might have been. The clerk's mouth had bent into an ugly smile handing it out to him, over the counter" (8-9). The contempt cast on Furlong by others in New Ross has lasted long past childhood and now shapes his interactions, and perhaps even his perceptions of his interactions. Furlong's birth and upbringing fundamentally shaped his perceptions of himself and his willingness to engage with others. Long into adulthood, Furlong has continued to carry a rather sad and insecure air about him, to the point that when spending time with his wife, Eileen, "Furlong felt that he was poor company for her, that he seldom made a long night shorter. Did she ever wonder how her life would be if she had married another?" (37-38). Furlong repeatedly wishes to share his thoughts and ideas with Eileen but ultimately keeps them to himself, likely due to his fears that he is inadequate and what he has to say is not of any importance. As a victim of bullying from a young age, he has become a man consigned to silence so as to protect himself from unwelcome attention in an attempt to survive.

Mother Superior, the main force of the Church with whom Furlong interacts throughout the novella, further exemplifies the hypocrisies and abuses of power concerning women and their bodies that enables the Church to maintain its power. She is situated in the uncomfortable position of being a female figure of power within a patriarchal system that denies power from women themselves. Mother Superior exists in a space where she is stuck; she cannot hold a true position of power within the Church beyond where she is now. She can never become a priest,

forced to remain always below the men of the Church. She instead is able to exert power over other women, which she does to her fullest capacity. In an interaction with Furlong, Mother Superior laments over the fact that he has raised a family of daughters, saying it must be disappointing to not have a boy to carry on the family name, clearly intending to shame Furlong for his illegitimacy and his mother's social transgressions, which he stands up against in reminding Mother Superior that he himself took his mother's name (69-70).

While Mother Superior's biases against young girls shape her personal interactions, the corruption of the Church as a whole allows her the rewarding gratification of hypocrisy when directly policing women's bodies and actions. One such example occurs after Furlong rescues Sarah from the coal shed and inquires after her safety. In return, Mother Superior offers him a bribe and a threat in place of the usual Christmas card and Christmas compensation given to the Furlong family by the nuns. This year, the illustration on the card depicts *The Flight into Egypt.* The flight into Egypt occurred after King Herod heard of the birth of a baby that would threaten his power and ordered for all newborn boys to be killed, prompting Mary and Joseph's fleeing to Egypt to protect their newborn son. Mother Superior is familiar with the story of the family's flight into Egypt and Jesus's position as an illegitimate child. The circumstances of the Laundry are similarly based in the belief that by interning unmarried mothers (instead of murdering sons), the Church is righting their wrongs and teaching them the consequences of their moral failures. The abuses that the girls and women then suffer at the hands of the Church is fair and just, as they have committed a sin far worse than any other crime. In the eyes of the nuns, the neglect the babies face, including the possibility of death, is the mother's own fault for failing her duties as a child of God. In giving Furlong a card intended to be a threat that displays *The Flight into Egypt*, Mother Superior unknowingly calls attention to her own hypocrisy: her actions are informed by a

desire to maintain power and control, like Herod. As a nun, she has a responsibility to protect the Catholic Church and the values it stands for, a faith that was created due to the birth of a child who came from an unmarried mother, a mother and child that likely faced scrutiny due to their circumstances. Instead, she subjects countless young, unmarried mothers to abuses designed to keep them in line, while still celebrating the birth of Jesus and recognizing the events of his life, such as the flight into Egypt. Mother Superior's using an image of Jesus in administering a bribe underscores the Church's hypocrisy in asserting and revering the being and aliveness of Jesus and Mary in contrast with the dehumanization of young Irish mothers and their children. Rather than protecting the weak and vulnerable, the Catholic Church and Mother Superior prioritize power and control, made possible through the normalization of young mothers' incarceration.

The intense policing of women's bodies plays into their dehumanization, allowing bystanders to reduce them to their position as Other. Their marginalization is made into a small thing, something that can easily be ignored and positioned as an individual, personal problem, which plays a large part in the success of the Church's campaign against young women. Furlong, however, pokes at the surface of the issue through his internal dialogues: "Some nights, Furlong lay there with Eileen going over small things like these. Other times…he'd lie with his mind going round in circles, agitating, before finally he'd have to go down and put the kettle on, for tea" (11-12). Furlong is a man who cannot ignore the hardships of others–the small things–but that which constitutes a "small thing" is entirely dependent on perspective. When turning a blind eye at the happenings of the laundry, it very well may be a small thing to the townsfolk who are just trying to survive, but it is a matter of life and death to the girls imprisoned within. A young boy sneaking milk from a cat's bowl might be a "small thing" to those who are well off or comfortable; for Bill Furlong, who experienced economic and social hardship in his youth, this

glimpse of privation prompts anxious action. Taking pity on a "fallen woman" may be a small thing to Mrs. Wilson, who is protected from social opprobrium as the occupant of the Big House, but her acts of kindness to Furlong and his mother mean everything. For Furlong and his mother, Mrs. Wilson's actions were life changing. While Mrs. Wilson's kindness did not completely shelter Furlong from the pain of being the son of an unmarried mother, she gave Furlong an environment full of love grow up in that he would have been barred from in a life where he was raised by his mother or she was interned in a laundry, such as how her encouragement after Furlong won the spelling competition made him "[believe], in his heart, that he mattered as much as any other child" (29).

Furlong's ponderings about what life would look like "if they were given time to think and reflect over things" is the tool that allows him to break through and see Sarah, stepping in and confronting her imprisonment (21). In the perspective of the townspeople and the Church, Sarah's reality is a small thing. She is one girl among the many who make up the population of young girls and women subject to policing by the Catholic Church. In the moment, it can be difficult to see the significance of taking a moment to consider the impacts that one's actions can have in the case of liberating one girl when compared to the large-scale liberation of thousands of women. The Church's system of policing women's bodies through laundries is only made possible through its careful manipulation of the population to remain complicit through the ignorance of the small things. Furlong's contemplation rings true: if they were given time to think and reflect over things, they could think of the small things and perhaps work through the complex nature of the subjugation of women, their bodies, and their children. Furlong uniquely engages in deep thought, pushing him closer to recognizing Sarah's aliveness.

Furlong's engagement in deep thought and consideration cannot allow him to ignore the violations of young women that other members in the town *must* ignore. The first time in the novella that Furlong steps into the chapel, the girls cleaning the floors inside are clearly maltreated, with missing shoes and sheared hair. Furlong, however, initially has no desire to inquire into the situation of a young girl who approaches him:

> 'Take me home with you then. I'll work til I drop for ya, sir.'
>
> 'Haven't I five girls and a wife at home.' (44).

He has no where he can take her, and his response indicates the trouble he could get into by resisting the norm of ignoring the girls' reality. By arguing that he has a family at home, Furlong is not just telling the girl that he already has a full house. He reveals that even if he wanted to rescue her, he cannot ignore the repercussions that could fall on his family by committing such a transgression. By resisting the girl's pleas, Furlong is protecting himself and his family. Additionally, her pleas to help "us" by helping her to escape by herself indicates the power that one freed girl could have over the entire situation. If she were to escape, perhaps her situation would be amplified to the whole town and would serve as the catalyst to the downfall of the laundry. This ultimately does not happen now, as Furlong keeps his head lowered and as is his nature, keeps his worries to himself. He cannot find the confidence within himself to say anything, and "the urge to say something about the girl grew but fell away," as Furlong still cannot decide how or when he should speak his mind (45). Furlong's early life has trained him to act out of self-preservation, yet his relationship with illegitimacy and the policing of women have instilled in him a special sympathy for the young girls whose fate closely reflects that to which his own mother could have easily succumbed.

Furlong's tendency to ruminate is what causes him to center his thoughts around whether to intervene in the incarceration of Sarah, who has been held within the walls of the laundry. Furlong first encounters Sarah as he arrives at the convent early on a cold morning days before Christmas; when he opens the locked doors to the coal shed, he finds a girl hidden within who has been punished by being trapped inside the shed for what has likely been longer than a day and split from her fourteen week-old baby. When initially reflecting on what to do with her, Furlong reveals that "once more the ordinary part of him simply wanted to be rid of this and get on home" (64). Throughout the rest of the novella, Furlong grapples with the consequences of his actions in returning Sarah to the nuns and continues to ruminate over the state he left her in. At the close of the novella, when he returns to the convent to find Sarah trapped in the coal shed once again on Christmas morning, Furlong brings Sarah home with him, freeing her from the physical clutches of the Church.

When Furlong finds Sarah in the shed, he is faced with the image of her from dual perspectives: the Sarah of his memories, his mother, who was rescued by Mrs Wilson and the Big House, and the Sarah of his present, who is presently policed by the systems and powers in place. Both Sarahs have been impacted by the policing of women's bodies and sexuality by the Catholic Church, and yet each woman has considerably different experiences. Furlong is confronted with his own position between these realities as he is suddenly no longer able to easily ignore the subjugation of women within his community. Furlong, unafforded the same power and control as the Church and distanced from the safety of silence utilized with the townspeople, is forced to continue to think and reveal to himself the state of aliveness that Sarah possesses, refusing to see her as either a victim or as a transgression.

Furlong's inclination to think deeply is what allows him to reveal the humanity of the abused. While sitting in the barbershop on Christmas Eve, Furlong falls deep into thought upon seeing his reflection in the mirror. He recalls the woman at the Wilson's likening of Furlong to Ned, Mrs. Wilson's farm, drawing the conclusion that the two men were closely related. This reflection serves as a catalyst for Furlong's deep thinking and ultimate action in finally rescuing Sarah from the convent later that day. Even though he never outwardly identified as Furlong's father, Ned took up the parental role that Furlong needed. He taught him skills that technically anyone could have taught him, but a father generally takes on, as he "bought him his first razor and taught him how to shave" (104). Sarah and her child have none of these small things that make up a life worth living. Although Furlong can't save Sarah's baby, he can save Sarah. He can save her and try to be the father he never had for a girl who resembles the mother he did have.

In being faced with the reality that Ned, his likely father, never stepped in and protected Furlong and his mother from the social shame of illegitimacy, Furlong can no longer justify his silence. His and Sarah's situations are too similar to be ignored. In this moment, Furlong's empathy for Sarah transforms into urgency, motivated by his own lived experiences. He and Sarah are made one, connected through their shared experiences of patriarchal violence. The "what if" becomes too strong, propelling him towards action, pushing him to recognize the oneness and aliveness of his and Sarah's relationship. Other members of the town do not have the frameworks to address Sarah's suffering as a part of a larger system, reducing her incarceration to a small thing that is the result of her individual actions and morality, allowing them to remain justified in their silence. Furlong, however, understands the stakes at hand, understands the danger that surrounds the silence. Furlong knows the difference between love

and shame, between being cared for unconditionally and being treated as though one is a contagion. Furlong cannot act until he is forced to reconcile with his own upbringing filled with love, despite its mismatched nature.

Often, centering humanity comes at a deep risk, as confronting silence-induced dehumanization requires the destabilization of interconnected systems of oppression. Furlong has continually been warned, through his own life experiences and the literal warnings from Mrs. Kehoe and even Mother Superior herself, of the violence that he and his family will face if he gets too close to the issue. With his meddling, Furlong's business will lose at least one major customer, the Church, if not others whom the nuns pressure to pull back their support of Furlong. Additionally, Furlong's daughters will lose the ability to attend New Ross's preeminent girl's school. Despite the extreme pushback Furlong will face for acting to protect Sarah's life, he realizes that "the worst was yet to come…but the worst that could have happened was already behind him; the thing not done, which could have been–which he would have had to live with for the rest of his life" (114). In Furlong's mind, the bigger violence would have been to leave Sarah behind, pushing her further back in his mind until he was able to continue on with the life that he is comfortable living. He is in a position to take Sarah out of the environment she has been trapped in and is motivated by the weight that would be left on his conscience by leaving her, denying her her aliveness and being. Leaving her, allowing her to remain imprisoned, would be to contribute to the violations inflicted on women in the name of morality. Leaving her would be to inflict further violence on her body, allowing her to become a tool of oppression for the Church, a reminder to the rest of the town of what could happen if they too commit a transgression so terrible as being a sexually deviant young woman.

Furlong's action and deep thinking reveals the vitality of centering the humanity of young women rather than their victimhood in being able to take action against systemic oppressions. Furlong's own proximity to marginalization alerts him to see the danger presented by remaining silent; he is then the one who is able to disrupt the social norm because of his own status as an outcast, marginalized member of the community. He is able to connect with Sarah, seeing her for who she is and breaking through the culture of silence surrounding Church-enforced oppressions. Violence is haunting, as evidenced by Furlong's deep ruminations throughout the novella, and refusing to address violence restricts disempowered women from accessing their own right to life, reducing them to ghostly victims. Stepping in requires centering the life of the young women, and as Furlong reveals, such centering is dependent on recognition of humanity in own's thoughts. Those who have not been deeply impacted lack the urgency required to stand against the violence inflicted on young mothers and their children by the Catholic Church. Others in the town can still turn away because this could happen anywhere, so there is nothing they can do, whereas Furlong can step in because he recognizes that the violence against young women's bodies and livelihoods can't just happen anywhere, it takes specific conditions and attitudes for such occurrences to become acceptable. Furlong's proximity to violence against sexually deviant women is what forces him to rescue Sarah from the Laundry, taking one small step in confronting the massive legacies of female confinement. Sarah is no longer a victim or transgressor, she is a unique life who exists beyond her trauma.

Interchapter: Child Abuse and Creative Resistance

The late 1980s and early 1990s in Ireland were a moment of social and political change, encompassing both a shift in Irish women's representation and opportunities, as well as a turning in perceptions of the Catholic Church. Following the mid-1980s, a series of scandals exposed abuses taking place within the Catholic Church, most significantly the revelations regarding deeply-concealed priest pedophilia. In 1994, a Northern Irish priest from Belfast, Father Brendan Smyth, was accused of the sexual abuse of seventeen young children (Ferguson 247). Though this case took place in Northern Ireland, it still had implications extending beyond the border. Throughout the rest of the 1990s, cases began to emerge revealing the depth of the child sexual abuse being suppressed by Church authority figures. In 1995, Andrew Madden came forward claiming he was paid by the Dublin archdiocese to stay silent about the abuse he faced by Reverend Ivan Payne, and in 1999, Reverend Sean Fortune, charged with sixty-six counts of sexual abuse of boys, died by suicide while awaiting trial (Associated Press). Such cases ignited widespread outrage over the suppression of child abuse by the Catholic Church, inspiring investigations into instances of abuse in other Catholic-run institutions such as Magdalene laundries and industrial schools. Creative works have interrogated legacies of abuse and violence, sparking creative forms of resistance and means of highlighting the necessity of protecting the vulnerable, such as such as Sinéad O'Connor's performance on Saturday Night Live in 1992, demanding accountability from Pope John Paul II as she ripped his photo.

Chapter 2

You'll show me all my lands and evil heart as you know it.

–Eimear McBride, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*

Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* is situated in a late 80s-90s Ireland, utilizing a contemporary modernism to examine the social climate during the time frame of the novel. The novel's protagonist, an unnamed young girl, narrates the events of the novel to the reader using a stream of consciousness style, providing the reader with a narrative that requires careful attention to detail. As Girl grows from infancy to young adulthood, she narrates her relationships with others, such as her often difficult relationship with her older brother, who was left permanently impacted by a brain tumor that was removed as a toddler, and the discomfort and trauma of her relationship with her uncle, the husband of her mother's sister who sexually abuses Girl throughout her adolescence to her young adulthood. The novel's disjointed prose mirrors Girl's state of mind and well-being as she undergoes adverse experiences, culminating in her suicide at the end of the novel. Throughout, McBride focuses on patriarchal violence, Catholicism, and bodily autonomy to critique the systems that allow for such violences to occur in the first place. The novel's depiction of Catholicism, parallelled with intense images of sexual violence, invite a critique of patriarchal power structures that rely on silence to foster violent bodily violations. The novel's siblings, both stripped of their right to bodily autonomy, have been taught to recognize the inescapability of bodily violence. Girl relies on her relationship with her brother to serve as a breach in the unspeakable nature of her individual and their shared traumas. In her broken narrative and unnamed Girl, McBride emphasizes the consequences of so deeply connecting trauma to being, leaving no chance for life or outside intervention.

The novel's modernist style provides a vehicle for such critiques, as described by Paige Reynolds in her book *Modernism in Irish Women's Contemporary Writing: The Stubborn Mode.* Reynolds emphasizes that for contemporary Irish women, modernism serves as a useful tool to interrogate cultural, social, and personal problems that impacted women in the previous century, introducing the stubborn mode:

> stubborn modes are tried-and-true literary tactics that trigger a sense of recognition when readers encounter them, a constellation of traits—including style, tone, forms, content, and history—commonly associated with a particular literary movement or school that travels across time. Composed of literary conventions, the stubborn mode of modernism sustains the aesthetic as well as the political impulses associated with the movement's early history. (4)

Because modernism is easily recognizable and adheres to certain conventions alongside its literary experiments, it is particularly impactful when coupled with Irish women's writing. Reynolds points out the "stubborn" nature of women's politics, citing stubborn strategies of "repetition and adamancy, of overstaying your welcome, of demanding to be acknowledged," behaviors that frequently are associated with women activists and creators of social change (18). Irish women authors, then, pair their own "stubborn" and defiant actions with modernism, allowing for the dissection of social problems through a lens already associated with such dissections.

McBride's *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* therefore situates itself within a genre that serves to disrupt, and disrupt it does. Published in 2013, McBride's novel was written in 2004, failing to reach the market for nine years. As described by Aran Ward Sell in "Half-Formed Modernism," *A Girl*'s eventual breakthrough can be attributed to the resurgence of Irish literary

modernism following the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, a period of economic prosperity in Ireland which I describe earlier (396). The literature of the Celtic Tiger was largely realist and historical, but following the crash this form was no longer effective at depicting Irish lives. Instead, writers turned to modernism, "an emergent genre which could be called *stream of damaged consciousness,* where Irish and Irish-diasporic writers offer space on the page to traumatized, mentally ill, and even dead characters, depicting an Ireland defined negatively against the glib corporate idiom of the Celtic Tiger" (Ward Sell 397). Finally, there was a need for McBride's novel.

The novel's dense content and experimental form allows for a variety of criticism and interpretation. According to Anne Fogarty, in addition to being a modernist text, *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing* situates itself as a broken *bildungsroman*, one in which the principal character's development from fetus to young adult is disrupted before she has a chance to mature to her fullest. Fogarty describes in her article "'It was like a baby crying': Representations of the Child in Contemporary Irish Fiction" that the image of a traumatized, neglected child serves to direct the readers to notice the ways in which a child is a "deep-rooted illusion," claiming that in the contemporary Irish *bildungsroman*, growing up is impossible. In the context of *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing,* she asserts that "[t]he half-formed language of the girl is wielded by McBride to question every aspect of Irish reality, but particularly the ways in which adults wield social and sexual power over children whom they lastingly damage and misshape" (Fogarty 24). Siân White, writing in "Stories are a Different Kind of True: Gender and Agency in Contemporary Women's Fiction," posits that the novel's experimental and half-formed stream of consciousness allows it to wield the truth more effectively: "While the form directly conveys the experience of victimization, the Girl's assertions of power cannot be dismissed. She is a victim who

nevertheless is able and has the right to make choices, even though she bears some responsibility for the harm she suffers" (360). Allowing the Girl to speak from her own perspective allows her agency, preventing her from being viewed as solely a victim of trauma and gendered social violence. Reynolds places Girl's prayer at the center of her analysis, exposing the role Catholicism plays in female suffering. She highlights Girl's manipulation and deconstruction of prayer in her stream of consciousness, establishing that "religious practice, and prayer in particular, cannot be disentangled from the horrifying injuries and injustices endured by the girl at the center of the novel" (Reynolds 81-82).

One of the novel's most notable features is its stream-of-consciousness style and second-person narration, echoing the literary risks taken by Modernist writers during the early 20th century, drawing comparisons to James Joyce, Ireland's most celebrated Modernist novelist. The narration begins while the narrator is still in the womb, as she describes to her brother scenes that she could not have been present for, but must have absorbed nonetheless: "You white-faced feel the needle go in. Feel fat juicy poison poison young boy skin. In your arteries. Eyeballs. Spine hands legs. Puke it cells up all day long. No Mammy don't let them" (4). She narrates the scenes of her brother's brain tumor diagnosis and treatment, displaying tremendous sympathy for the strains the process put on her parent's marriage and her mother's faith. She continues to narrate from birth until young adulthood, addressing her words to her brother, the "you" of the narration. Addressing her words to "you," to her brother, allows her to share the burden of her narrative. She confides in him, and his elevated status in the narrator's prose awards him position as a form of a second-in-command. Centering her words around him lets the narrator direct the attention to her brother, allowing his characterization to become equally important to her own, deflecting the attention of the narrative away from herself. His existence and insistent address are vital to the

narrator's shifting of attention from herself; although she is still describing events that she was the focus of, the stories become centered around her brother, frequently replacing her as the "main character." Even after his death, the narration is still largely directed to the brother, with the narrator imagining an interaction with her brother following a brutal rape at the lake near her childhood home, and later, a verbal attack from her mother at home:

> I open the door look at. You're away saying what's gone on you're not. I wish. You were. See do you see what I did to my face for you lying there? Oh I. No I don't. They look at me. I fell and wish I fell don't. I just fell. You should. Can hardly talk your voice comes up but far away from me. I know you know the. Sound of. Sssh you can't talk to me. I know I don't I do. Peel off from you what face once was (220).

She needs her brother in order to continue processing her traumatic life events, and manufactures his presence when necessary. Together, they have a space that exists for only them, a space where Girl can safely exist for a moment without pressure. The deeply interconnected nature of the siblings' relationship allows Girl an opportunities for respite from her trauma, creating small pockets of vulnerability.

With their respective neurodivergence and lingering tumor and femininity, respectively, the two siblings occupy similarly low hierarchical statuses. Her brother's position as a young neurologically and physically disabled man and her own as a young woman allow them to share with one another similar social experiences, such as the bullying they both face in grade school from their peers. The Girl's narrations to her brother allow her to rely on him mentally, as she observes his inability to fit in with his peers, seeing how he too is made a social outcast. She keeps his secrets, not telling the other children or her mother of her brother's lie that his scar is

from a knife attack, rather than a medical incision, and in turn relies on her narration to her brother to be a kind of secret keeping of her own.

In her depiction of family, McBride highlights the power Catholicism has over bodies and autonomy. The novel makes apparent the generational cycles that take place in order to establish such a conditioning, first presenting the Girl and her Brother's grandfather, a violent, abusive man who taught his fifteen children to stay in line through exploiting their fear of God: "Mass every morning for all children over three and the wrath of God for anyone saying Jesus outloud or even in your head. For what's unsaid's as bad as, if not worse" (14). From the very beginning of her life, the Girl's mother was conditioned to believe that children's thoughts and actions must be policed and kept in line through the disguise of Catholic reverence. Her father's abuse was justified, allowing it to continue into her adulthood and into her relationship with her own children.

McBride also points to the often contradictory and restrictive relationship Catholicism has with sex to further deepen her connection of Catholicism to women's disempowerment. The grandfather and grandmother of Girl use of prayer as a disguise for sex to keep their activities private from their children, further reinforcing Catholicism's association with bodily violence for the children, as "prayer time" results in "their babies and babies lining up like stairs. For mother of perpetual suffering prolapsed to hysterectomied. A life spent pushing insides out for it displeased Jesus to give that up" (4). The mother's excessive pregnancies and subsequent uterine prolapse, solved by hysterectomy, strips her of her reproductive abilities through the violation and harm of unprotected sex resulting a physically unhealthy number of pregnancies, and such violent repeal of bodily autonomy is ultimately defended through religious values and reproductive "obligations" of Catholic women. Despite the narrator's brief moment of sarcasm

here, as how could it possible displease Jesus to give up bodily harm, the message is clear. The woman's body is no longer her own, and never was, and as they watch their mother undergo such treatment, her children are taught this lesson as well.

Despite the trauma, resistance is offered in moments of abuse. After the grandfather ends his visit abruptly, claiming "there must be something wrong with you…I don't want to hear the words of the evil one from my own daughter's mouth" after witnessing her failure to raise her children right (the son's not knowing the Hail Mary and the daughter's somersaults in a skirt), the mother retaliates against her children (19). She takes out the embarrassment of her father's religiously-motivated emotional abuse physically: "crack my eyes are bursting from my head with the wallop. Blood rising up my nose. Drips my head forward…Your hands can't keep her off. She knows all the duck and weave we've done before" (20). The children know how to act in such a situation. They know that to be forgiven, they must prove themselves to their mother and take care of her. They have learned it is their job to comfort their mother after such events of violence, signaling that this abuse is not abnormal and is likely to happen again, but they have come to learn how to protect one another as best as they can. They also begin to learn that violence in response to religious failings is acceptable. Witnessing the grandfather's violence against the mother in response to her failure to properly raise her children according to Catholicism, and then being on the receiving end of the violence after the mother's shame for disappointing her father for not maintaining a strict Catholic household causes the children to form subconscious connections between religion, violence and abuse, and the violation of bodily autonomy. However, it is in the moments after the abuse that the children reveal their shared resistance. Their coming together to care for one another, and even for their mother when they

make her tomato soup, reveals the communal nature of resistance and empowerment that can exist within deeply traumatic experiences.

The novel's depictions of the inherent bodily violence that manifests in Catholic practices provides further evidence of the constant conditioning contributing to normalization of bodily violence against the marginalized siblings, such as in the scenes of the Brother's Last Rites. As the Brother lays sleeping in his bedroom, a priest visits the home to administer the Sacrament of the Sick. The young man whose brain damage is so advanced that he must now use a diaper and often cannot remember what day it is or the personal details of those close to him is expected to take part in a ceremony to absolve him of sin, but such circumstances render him unable to consent to such ceremonial practices. Even as Girl protests that "he couldn't sin if he wanted," Mother remains firm in her decision to have the priest perform the ritual (204):

> He wash his fingers. Do you renounce Satan and all his ways? Oil on his thumbs. Draw the cross on you. Your eyes and ears. Your lids clappered shut. Don't wake I pray into my fingertips … I pray I pray I pray I pray. For. Him to go. For you. You will not know what this priest's done. What cross mean. What oil. What stink where you have been sanctified (205).

Ironically, in Girl's attempts to defend Brother's autonomy, she too engages in implicit Catholic violence disguised as prayer. In her prayers for Brother to remain asleep, she rids him of his consent in participating, just as the priest and Mother deny Brother consent in performing the ritual in the first place. Brother never wakes during the ritual and is unable to actively participate. He is unable to decide if he does or does not want such a task performed, and is instead subjected to the wills of Mother, the powers of the priest, and even Girl herself. The event indicates that such ignorance of consent are commonplace, demonstrating that those involved with the Church

have been carefully manipulated into believing that certain activities justify the omission of consent and bodily autonomy. If a priest is given full authority over one's body, the refusal of a highly revered figure to accept a person as an autonomous being sets up the circumstances that permit others authority over bodies that are not their own and creates an environment where a violation of bodily autonomy can easily be swept under the rug, justified, or ignored entirely. Even prayer itself can be used in a way that denies consent, meaning that individual practitioners can wield Catholicism in such a way that relies on the violation of autonomy and consent in the name of good will.

Catholic imagery and mass too are deeply intrenched in bodily violence. The act of receiving communion involves consuming bread and wine that have been transformed into the body and blood of Christ through consecration. Girl begins to explore the dynamics of bodily violence from a young age, starting with defacing of a picture of Jesus after Mass. As Girl draws on the picture, she adds to Jesus's blood and wounds, wondering, "Where's the pain in that one? But I'd like to hear him crying, screaming most of all. How bad was it Jesus?" (24). Torturing Jesus with her markers serves as her emotional catharsis after Mass. The Girl needs to witness Jesus's pain and sacrifice for herself, as if she cannot believe him or his message without being the inflictor of his pain. When her brother catches her, he is not upset at her for her the violence she has been intending to inflict, but rather for drawing blood between Jesus's legs, a transgression because of its accidental reference to menstruation: "that makes Jesus cry…it's dirty" (25). The Brother's anger is prompted to his own perceived act of bodily violence: the comparison of Jesus to a woman. The most understandable anger in this moment would have been to scold his sister over her torture of Jesus, but instead he is most offended by the tarnishing of Jesus's image. In this moment, the novel reveals the children's exposure to gendered

prejudice. Suggesting Jesus could be similar to a woman is what it takes to warrant going to the "hot place," emphasizing the importance placed on masculinity, and the inferior status of women's bodies.

The novel's depiction of power and need complicates social hierarchy, indicating that a clear definition between forms of prejudice and marginalization cannot be made easily. When Girl responds to Mother's description of Brother as a bit "subnormal" with the destruction of a beloved statue of the Virgin Mary, she is faced with a different response. Instead of being punished with the threat of eternal damnation, she is instead comforted by her Mother, who seems to not mind and instead guides Girl through breathing exercises to help her calm down (48). Here, McBride draws a connection between Brother's disability and gender hierarchy. In her shielding of Brother from the social stigma of being "subnormal, Girl engages in the destruction of a revered female body. The only way Girl can find to disrupt Mother's stigmatization of Brother is through gendered violence. Readers see then that the Girl has developed her associations with anti-female violence, allowing her to express her emotions through the bodily violence against Mary herself. The Girl's defense of her Brother comes at the expense of sacred femininity and her attempts to stand in solidarity fall short.

Girl also uses her personal trauma in defense of her brother. Raped for the first time by her Uncle when she is thirteen, Girl seeks to reassert her own power, informed by her trauma, through her weaponization of her sexuality in protection of her Brother. Developing associations between female bodily violence and the escaping of difficult conversations, emotions, and situations, Girl is then able to justify the sexual abuse that occurs during her late teen and early adult life, beginning with her use of her body to defend her brother. The Girl engages in sex with boys in her brother's class, beginning with a young boy who had been making fun of her brother

for his surgical scar and cognitive disabilities. As they sit together by the lake, she wishes he would leave her alone and redirects his attention by initiating sex with him. After the two teenagers return to their friends, "He came too sat beside. Put his arm around my waist. I push that off. What are you doing? Am I your wife?... He was the first off. Worst off. I begin. Now I know full well what I can do. For me and for you" (79). The Girl reveals her lack of emotional connection to the young boy and her interest in protecting her brother. By initiating sex with older boys, she holds power through her sexual knowledge and their comparative lack thereof, giving her power and shifting the focus of conversation from her brother's disability and onto her own sexuality. She acts in a way she thinks she must to gain control, as the only tool she knows how to use is her sexuality. She also recognizes that in order to gain control or respect, she must allow for the violation of her body. Her defense of her brother's neurodivergence and alienation is marred by the underlying presence of her rape trauma.

Part of the narrator's attempts to cope is to repress the memories of such events, and to redirect conversations surrounding similar topics, allowing her to redirect the focus indirectly away from her trauma and back onto her, recentering herself, rather than the abuse. When her college friend shares details of her experience of being molested by her father, the narrator also has the opportunity to be vulnerable, but chooses to tell her "patterns of the truth but not it" (107). Rather than to confide in a close friend with who could empathize, the narrator is unable to verbalize her own traumas and instead "it's for dwelling in there" (107). The narrator has no choice but to isolate herself from her friend as she asks herself, "What is there to say?" (107). As she continues to isolate herself from those around her while self-harming through sex, her own narration serves as both an extension of her self-censorship and as a space where she has the freedom to share and work through her suppressed memories and traumas. The stream-of-

consciousness style of narration allows her to express her autonomy in a way that she can chose which events she desires to elaborate on, and provides a verbalization of the mental effort she takes to suppress certain memories, as well as the devastating impacts of the events themselves. As the events she experiences become more intense, her narration becomes further deconstructed, leading to sentences such as "stick it ionthe don'tinside wwherhtewaterisswimming htroughmynoseandmouth throughmysense myorgands sthroughmythrough" (222). She never spends time flashing-back to events, but instead relies on the erratic nature of her inner monologue to relay her suffering, becoming its own site of resistance. She can move past moments of trauma and abuse quickly, giving her agency in events she otherwise has no ability to exert agency in.

Girl's relationship with Brother also helps her resist such emotional repression suppressing her development of thought and addressing her trauma. Without him, the Girl is alone, fending for herself. When the Brother's brain tumor returns and he is given a year left to live, the Girl begins commuting more often back home from the city to spend time with and take care of her Brother, becoming increasingly concerned about her future without him: "Sting me to the bones to see you this way. To see you. There is nothing to say for the jaws shut tight when I'm alone. Will we all get better? Will we all be fine? Father in heaven. Father up above. I don't want my brother to die" (152). Without her Brother, the Girl will not have anyone to rely on or voice her concerns to. Her own well-being is intrinsically tied to her Brother's, as indicated by her questioning: will *we* get better? Her Brother cannot die, as that would mean she would die as well, a fact cemented at the close of the novel. In life, he serves as her tether to reality in the midst of her ongoing sexual traumas and precarious relationship with her Mother.

McBride's depictions of control and disempowerment through Catholicism, domestic abuse, and rape underscore the trauma of forced silence, but also reveal moments of resistance, coming together at the end of the novel to highlight to the reader what we risk by overlooking aliveness in favor of looking for abuse. Girl's death by baptismal suicide at the close of the novel finalizes her dependance on Brother, who shares her burden of trauma. She cannot exist without the presence of her Brother, who left her behind in her moment of need. As his condition progressed, with rounds of chemo doing little to stop the aggression of his recurrent brain tumor, leading to his rapid mental deterioration and death, the Girl's sexual traumas became magnified. The Girl's close contact with her Uncle allows him to further sexually manipulate the unethical power dynamics of their relationship, especially relying on her conflation of coping with the sexual exploitation of her body. She also begins to seek out sexual encounters with strangers in an attempt to cope with watching her Brother slowly succumb to the brain damage caused by his tumor. Without him, however, subjecting herself to brutal sexual violence can no longer serve as a coping mechanism. As she enters the lake, the Girl joins with her brother once again as she seeks his guidance through the water:

> Rise up the lake above me. Take me where the waters go. I'll take your hand. You'll show. You'll show me all my lands and evil heart as you know it. Brother me. Clean here. Show me all the places of a soul. Where I will calm. And calm now. Give up dry land.
>
> I'm. Tired. Let it.
>
> Go there.
>
> Struggle down. We are down down down (228).

The siblings' relationships have flipped; no longer is Girl guiding and protecting her Brother. Instead, he now takes the form of a savior, a Jesus-like figure who from beyond life can show her the heavenly afterlife to which she belongs and forgive her of her "evil heart," one which is characterized by Catholicism as being inherently evil and sinful, but which has instead acted largely in instincts of self-preservation and defense of her Brother. Both half-formed yet made one in death, Girl and her Brother must find balance and save one another, a moment of deep aliveness. As evidenced by the overwhelming abuses inflicted by figures of power in the lives of the siblings, the system is against them. It is their dependance on one another in the face of abuse and trauma that allows them to cope. In Girl's suicide to reach her Brother once more, she exposes the brutality of the systems of power which have contributed to her marginalization. Without external support, Girl has no choice but to search for the support offered to her once by her brother, seeking the only way out of the culture of silence and abuse in which she exists. However, her suicide also is an act of reclaiming her life for herself, separating herself from the narrative of trauma that surrounds her. She resists victimhood, taking back agency even in death.

Interchapter– Irish Fairylore

Though contemporary Irish women novelists often investigate the past to understand the present, their novels set in the present too seek to complicate histories of violence. One method Irish women novelists use to interrogate social norms and transgressions is fairylore. Fairies and mythical beings are a significant part of an early Irish oral tradition, predating English colonization and the suppressing of the Irish language. Naula Ni Dhomnhaill, Irish poet and advocate for the reclamation of the Irish language in Irish literatures, emphasizes the language's features as "a welter of references both historical and mythological," indicating the inherent and deep connection of Irish mythologies to Irishness. The Irish language also allows a space for the imaginary and mythological to occupy a space that is neither true nor false:

> Let's say I decide some evening to walk up to my aunt's house in West Kerry. She hears me coming. She knows it is me because she recognizes my step on the cement pavement. Still, as I knock lightly on the door she calls out, "An de bheoaibh no de mhairbh thu?" ("Are you of the living or of the dead?") Because the possibility exists that you could be either, and depending on which category you belong to, an entirely different protocol would be brought into play. This is all a joke, of course, but a joke that is made possible by the imaginative richness of the language itself. (Ni Dhomnhaill)

Simply engaging with the language similarly evokes the fantastic, a mythology which is not easily supported in other frames of language. The work of scholars such as Ni Dhomnhaill serves to bring Irish tradition back into the dominant culture, preserving Irishness and revitalizing Irish legends.

During the Celtic Twilight, Irish writers in the late 1800s and early 1900s such as Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats utilized fairylore in their writing to explore taboo subjects and

reintroduce the use of fairylore in Irish, English language literature while revitalizing Irish cultural traditions. In Irish folklore, the fairy serves as a reminder of the social order that must be upheld. As noted by Irish folklore specialist Angela Bourke in her essay "The Virtual Reality of Irish Fairy Legend," "Fairies have no hope of salvation… so in the Catholic world-view of rural Ireland, they are forever outside human culture, exempt from control by its rules" (9). Fairies lurk on the edges between the human and Other worlds and act in such a way that reminds one of the proper order of the human world. Fairies enact chaos on the land, steal children and cattle, and serve as indicators of a violation of social and cultural norms (Bourke 10). The presence of fairies alerts one to social disruptions and serves as a way to police marginalized communities that are most at risk of violating the social order. Fairies live here and there and often nowhere. They are not bound by space and time and can often exist somewhere which is not a place at all. It is in these non-places where fairy magic happens (Bourke 12-13). One knows that a character has entered a non-place or that a fairy is meddling when things begin to go amiss and social constructs and violations are brought to light.

One variation of Irish fairylore is that of the changeling legend. In many tellings of this legend, a human baby is stolen and replaced with an identical changeling by fairies. The parents of the baby are not originally aware that their child has been replaced, but this news comes to light as it develops. As Susan Schoon Eberly explains in "Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids and the Solitary Fairy," the changeling assignment to a young child or person reveals an association between the legend and disability. Changelings can take the form of both infants and adults, revealing themselves through their unnaturally small size and sickly nature, their misshapen limbs, their tendency to cry, and that "[the supposed changeling] rarely sings or smiles or—that most human of all behaviours—talks" (Eberly 63). The characteristics

that identify changelings are also similar to a number of physical and mental disabilities, indicating that such folklore has served as a means to reason with the deviancy of children in instances when medical knowledge is limited. A neurodivergent child or adult might indeed be a changeling, while the real child, neurotypical and socially conforming, has been stolen by fairies.

As "thinking of her as Ireland" has often functioned to police the expression of Irish women, Irish fairylore too has been a tool used to suppress the agency of Irish women. Most significant in Irish historical accounts of the influence of the changeling legend is the burning of Bridget Cleary in 1895. Cleary was accused of being a changeling by her husband due to her inefficiencies in fulfilling her wifely duties. She was then the subject of social scrutiny, which resulted in her death by burning. Changeling narratives, though used to focus on a variety of social anxieties, are often used to silence women and push them to the margins for being non-conforming. Irish folklore allows a space for working through the unspeakable: a story subjecting an unwed mother to the wrath of the fairies serves as a space to police and reinforce normative standards for women. She must keep watch over her baby to make sure it has not been replaced by a changeling and stolen away to the Otherworld to be raised by the fairies. Similarly, if a young woman acts strangely or does not comply with prescribed norms, she may herself be accused of being a changeling.

The policing of women in such a way has led to significant pushback from woman writers in current times. Irish women writers such as Ní Dhomhnaill and Caitriona Lally have utilized fairy lore in their writing in order to interrogate subjects pervasive in contemporary Irish culture. *Eggshells*, influenced by Lally's recessionary experiences, explores a post-Tiger Dublin through the everyday wanderings of a neurodivergent woman. In the chapter that follows, I describe Lally's engagement with fairylore in her novel *Eggshells* and examine the connection of

fairylore and affirmation of different forms of existence as a resistance to narratives centering trauma.

Chapter Three

I like the place where one thing meets another–that's where the magic gets in.

–Caitriona Lally, *Eggshells*

One has not known eccentricity until one has met Vivian Lawlor, the protagonist in Caitriona Lally's *Eggshells*. Vivian fills her time in ways which might appear curious to an outsider, such as leaving money in the pockets of clothing hanging on the rack in a department store, digging her own grave in her backyard, or wandering the streets of Dublin searching for a portal to the Otherworld from where she knows she comes. At times, Vivian's strange behavior poses a threat to her safety and that of others, such as when Vivian serves David from the Social Welfare office tea from a kettle with "mouldy fur inside… [that] smells like soil multiplied" (51). Usually, however, Vivian's antics are simply her own harmless way of navigating the world. After inheriting a house following the death of her aunt, Vivian sympathizes with the lonely chairs and gives them each a turn to be sat in and communicate. She purchases a goldfish and keeps it in a bowl of lemons, thus inspiring the name "Lemonfish." She puts out an ad for a friend named Penelope by taping a sign to a tree. She searches for a portal to the Otherworld at the end of a rainbow in the ruins of an abandoned asylum. Vivian is an oddball and spends her days wandering Dublin in true oddball fashion.

To account for her difference and social alienation, Vivian identifies as a changeling, a description historically weaponized against both neurodivergent individuals and women to reason with their deviance. Though she does not offer the reader many details about her childhood or close, personal life, it is through cracks in her narrative that the reader is able to piece together a fractured story of the abuses she suffered at the hands of her now deceased parents. Vivian's abuse, enacted under the guise of the changeling legend, was prompted by her

parents by her neurodivergence and failure to conform to social norms and cues, which continues to impact Vivian's current actions and desires to conform. Consistent with folkloric remedies to dispel a changeling child in exchange for the original, Vivian's father tried everything to return her to the Otherworld, including "twice through the fire, once through the sea" (251). Vivian is the victim of childhood abuse and neglect, physically and verbally abused by her parents and ostracized by her sister, also named Vivian. Vivian has gone through tremendous struggles throughout her life and redeploys the changeling legend that her parents used to justify her abuse to explain to herself why she has been treated the way that she has. She is then able to act in such a way that does not align with societal expectations, and does not fear backlash because in her mind, her reasoning for her actions is sound: she is a changeling and thus cannot and does not conform to others' expectations.

Vivian subtly references themes of the changeling myth in relation to herself as she searches for portals that will take her back to the land where she belongs. Frequently, her embrace of her changeling self creates moments of tension or confusion with those she meets. In one situation, Vivian attempts to shop for fruit using an accent, trying to see if it could send her back home, but she ultimately has another awkward yet insightful encounter instead:

> "Where are you from love, with an accent like that?"
>
> "I'm not quite sure—that's what I'm trying to find out." (196)

Vivian reveals that while she has embraced the legend of the changeling to describe herself, she is still searching for belonging. She is existing in a state of in-between, much like the changelings of folklore. Vivian's identity is not set in stone and is instead fluid, allowing her to occupy space but not hold a true human form. Applying the changeling to her identity allows her agency over her experiences and her difference. Through her embrace of the changeling, Vivian

is able to experience the world more freely and is able to make meaning out of her uniqueness, resisting negative narratives of her deviancy from the social norms. Although at times she attempts to fit in, she largely accepts her difference and respects her individuality. The novel's comedic style allows Lally to investigate abuse and social deviancy from a perspective that respects and uplifts difference, resisting the notion that deviant and abused women must succumb to their trauma.

Critics and reviewers were quick to compare Lally's characterization of Vivian in *Eggshells* with that of James Joyce's Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, the main characters of *Ulysess.* Vivian, like Joyce's characters, spends her time wandering Dublin and making sense of what she encounters. José Manuel Estévez-Saá, author of "James Joyce's Echoes in Caitriona Lally's Portrait of Dublin City," describes Vivian as a woman contemporary of Stephen and Leopold, arguing that she occupies a space as a flâneuse that would have been unavailable in the previous century to women and offering Joyce's women characters as an example:

> Whenever we see them walking through the streets of Dublin, they are not rambling leisurely—like their male counterparts—but on purposeful errands, like the young woman Bloom follows after buying meat, Stephen's sister who is going to sell some books, or Mrs Breen in search of her mentally disturbed husband. (139)

Instead of her activities across the city being grounded in stereotypically feminine or domestic tasks, Vivian's wanderings are informed by her changeling identity. In the 21st century, Vivian is afforded greater access to the city and is able to exercise her identity and autonomy. I believe, however, in Estévez-Saá's analysis of Vivian's wanderings, he is ignoring that Vivian's activities are in fact formed by purpose. She does not explore the city purely out of leisure and ability, she is intentionally motivated by her desire to understand herself and find a space where she belongs.

Her activities are not meaningless, they are deliberate acts to assert herself in a city where she feels she does not belong. Her activities as a flâneuse can then be understood to be asserting her own life and being.

Critics also drew attention to *Eggshells*'s exploration of humanity and identity. Molly Ferguson's article "The Changeling Legend and Queer Kinship in Caitriona Lally's *Eggshells*" posits that in her deployment of the changeling legend first used by her family to inflict violence against her, Vivian intentionally embodies a nonconforming gender presentation (297). Vivian's rejection of contemporary constructions of femininity, along with her understanding of herself as fairy rather than human, obfuscates her alignment with either side of a rigid gender binary in post-Tiger Dublin. After establishing a queer reading of Vivian's gender presentation, Ferguson offers Judith Butler's theory of queer kinship to understand Vivian's search for companionship in lieu of the biological kinship she lacks from her own family: "As Penelope and Vivian's relationship progresses, they enact Butler's model of kinship, that 'kinship is a kind of doing, one that does not reflect a prior structure but which can only be understood as an enacted practice'" (305). Both survivors of familial trauma, Vivian and Penelope accept each other's nonconformance and create methods of kinship with one another that exist outside the methods of kinship that are supported in a traditional family arrangement. In Ireland, the heteronormative family structure has functioned to inflict institutional violence on women, and women's writing confronts such systems: "[Irish women's writing] illuminates pre-existing disorder in the family by recuperating the changeling figure and revising it as a model of alternative, queer kinship" (Ferguson 309). Ferguson's reading of Vivian's changeling identity as a tool for resisting heteronormative expectations of kinship and creating alternative spaces for women's existence leaves out a broader analysis of the role Vivian's neurodivergence plays in her inability to

conform to Irish social expectations. Though Vivian does indeed resist expectations of womanhood, her struggles in forming social connections are in large part due to her difficulty in conforming to a social structure that privileges neurotypicality.

Departing from both Estévez-Saá and Ferguson's analyses of Vivian's differences in social engagement, I propose that Vivian's deployment of the changeling legend allows her to engage with Kevin Quashie's conceptions of aliveness in such a way that the abused women of previous chapters are unable to. Instead of simply calling attention to Ireland's failure of young women in its silencing of being, Vivian, too a victim of abuse, deeply engages with the life around her and actively celebrates aliveness and oneness through her unique, magical way of moving through the world and enacts practices that actively counter violent silence.

Vivian's position on the margins of society contributes to her desire and ability to complicate the narratives and experiences of others who have found social success. Vivian does not wish to read the stories of famous people who claim they found success through their own hard work. She remains critical of these stories, calling them "half-lies from gleaming smiles" (242). Instead, Vivian wishes to read of the truths that acknowledge the role social upbringing and economic security play in creating success: "I want to read the stories they left out: the childhoods with enough to eat, the friends in school not the bullying, the connections to power not the start-from-scratch" (242). Vivian remains wary of the one-sided narratives representing the powerful as ones who made it big through their own hard work and determination. She instead questions what it means to have power in a post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. She herself gains power through her economic stability, afforded to her through her proximity to inherited wealth. After her great aunt passed away, Vivian was the recipient of her aunt's home and wealth, allowing her a secure place to live and disposable income, a privilege that sets her apart from

many others. Vivian's reservations about the acquisition of power resonate with the social landscape of the time. Her observations are a grim reminder that the underprivileged have been exploited in order for those in power to gain social mobility and success, an insight not limited to the small island nation of Ireland.

Vivian's neurodivergence often leads her to have difficulty navigating social interactions, which often reveals Irish society's continual failure to protect its most vulnerable communities. Unlike Sarah in *Small Things Like These* and Girl in *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing,* Vivian largely is able to escape the social scorn of being a deviant woman. In fact, her difference from others often points to systemic abuses caused by the silence of bystanders. In one such case, Vivian, who is not a mother, accidentally paints herself as one in order to fit in, as she understands motherhood is the only "proper" role for Irish women. After a cooking disaster, Vivian decides to spend the rest of the day eating only blue foods. When Vivian enters the check-out line at the supermarket with her blue foods, she lies to the shop assistant and says that the items are for her sons, who use mobility aids, for whom she is planning a "blue party:"

> 'When you've come in here to do your shopping, who minds them?
>
> 'Oh, they're fine on their own.'
>
> 'You leave them alone?'
>
> Her voice sounds like a cup shattered on a tile.
>
> I look from one angry face to the other.
>
> 'They can't get out of the wheelchairs, they're fine.' (41-42)

In the eyes of the grocery clerk and other shoppers, Vivian is an unfit mother who leaves her disabled sons at home alone while she does her daily shopping. Despite Vivian's inability to properly care for her (imaginary) sons, the clerk takes no actions to have them removed from

Vivian's custody. She does not report Vivian for child neglect or follow her home to verify that the children are safe. The clerk instead allows Vivian to purchase her items and leave the shop unaccosted. In her impersonation of an unfit mother, Vivian, the subject of abuse related to her difference, points to the shortcomings of a society that has long been grappling with legacies of abuse and neglect, such as the previously mentioned institutions of incarceration and cases of priest pedophilia. Vivian's interaction calls attention to to public's willingness to continue to look the other way in the face of abuse.

By identifying as a changeling, Vivian is afforded a cultural answer to her inability to fit in in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Her interactions with others are marked with funny phrases and miscommunications that prompt misunderstandings on her side of the conversation. However, Vivian recognizes that her deviancy serves as a means of ostracization and recognizes moments when she is better protected by masking her individuality. In one situation, Vivian meets a woman who is similarly neurodivergent; however, Vivian has a much different attitude towards this woman than she does towards herself. When the woman moves her head erratically and behaves strangely when boarding the bus, Vivian is eager to show the bus driver that she is unlike this strange woman who is unaware of social cues:

> "Mad as a bag of cats, wha'?"
>
> "Completely loo-lah," I say, and I twirl my finger around my temple…for once I'm not the mad one, I'm the person who puts mad people on buses and pushes them off again. (202)

Vivian knows that she does not conform and protects herself when she can be on the other side of societal scrutiny. The woman on the bus risks exposing her for her difference, thus Vivian must mask and overcompensate for her neurodivergence to avoid being similarly urged off the

bus. Here, Vivian is both resistant to and complicit in the policing of societal expectations due to her conflicting desires to enact her own identity and fit into the mainstream ways of being. Although Vivian desires to and very often does break the mold and assert her unique identity, she is still impacted by normative expectations for women and the social stigma of neurodivergence.

Despite Vivian's need to protect herself, her embrace of herself as a changeling as a means of identification allows her to extend empathy towards others when she is not risking her own safety in doing so. Such moments are truly when she creates space for the aliveness of others and establishes oneness. As a self-identified changeling, Vivian has a special attention for those who exist in the human world without ease, such as when she watches an action film in which the protagonist drives through a street full of vendor stalls:

> The cars plunge through the stalls, people scatter, tables of fruit and vegetables and meat and fish are knocked and sprawled and squashed and smashed. I want to see the film about the cleanup, the film about the people who are injured by the cars, the film about the people whose livelihoods have been ruined by a man in sunglasses who values his life above all else. I feel like I'm the only person rooting for the fruit seller instead of the hero. (95)

Vivian wants to see the story of the one who has to struggle to succeed. She doesn't want to see the story of someone who has it all but would rather see the story of a person whose marginalization is the direct result of the successes of someone else. Her own individuality and alienation due to her neurodivergence prompt her to value the protection of the vulnerable and mistreated. However, Vivian is not suggesting that stories should focus solely on the trauma of injury or destruction; instead, she seeks a narrative that centers the being of those impacted by

traumatic events. She recognizes that power can be asserted even in moments of tremendous hardship through uplifting the aliveness possessed by each individual in community with one another. Rooting for the fruit seller whose stand was destroyed by the hero of the story requires deep attention to life and being, emphasizing the intimacies required of protecting the vulnerable.

In addition to her commitment to centering being in the community, Vivian's friendship with Penelope emphasizes the oneness of Irish women as critical to centering aliveness rather than traumas. Penelope, whose real name is Elaine, is eccentric in a similar way to Vivian. She paints portraits of cats, does not brush her teeth, and most importantly, unconditionally accepts Vivian for who she is. Both women have been made vulnerable through familial abuse and do not fit in, needing one another to make sense of their own abuse. Vivian and Penelope accept one another despite their individual quirks and eccentricities. They support one another's desires without question; Penelope quite willingly helps Vivian dig her own grave in the backyard, and later helps her brew an eggshell stew in an attempt to send her away from the human world. When the two women attempt to make the eggshell stew that would banish Vivian up through the chimney, Vivian experiences a panic attack, causing her to scald herself with the boiling water and pass out. In taking off Vivian's jumper to assess the damage, Penelope discovers the scars on Vivian's body inflicted by her father's abuse: "My father tried to send me back, he wanted to swap me for his human child" (250). Here, Vivian reveals to Penelope the link between her changeling identity and the abuse she suffered from her parents. Vivian and Penelope have been drawn to one another and discover that their shared history of abuse allows them to reveal deeply repressed experiences. It is their mutual understanding and dependance on one another's friendship that allows them to breach taboo subjects and develop their friendship. Vivian and Penelope have gravitated to one another in their shared ability to understand

marginalization and difference, allowing them to see the life of one another and those around them. Both women's abuse deeply impacts their way of moving through the world, and their acceptance of one another's individuality allows them mutual safety and protection in their breeching of norms.

Further, Vivian's relationship with Penelope reveals the importance of centering aliveness rather than trauma in its emphasis on the work that must be done in collaboration to promote healing. Each time Penelope tells Vivian of her experiences of abuse and her fraught relationship with her mother, Vivian tunes her out, a dissociative coping strategy stemming from her trauma, like her identification with the changeling legend. She does not, cannot, hear stories of "neglect and unwashed corduroy trousers," instead electing for thoughts of cotton candy, sherbet fountains, and decadent cakes with buttercream icing (68). As a survivor of abuse, Vivian finds herself putting up walls to protect herself from recollections of her own trauma. She redirects her thoughts and the narrative away from abuse, further emphasizing the work that must be done from bystanders and those with the means to act. Although she understands the necessity of giving space for the truths of the abused and marginalized, the work of cannot be solely done by Vivian herself, as the burden of addressing social marginalizations and violences cannot be placed on the victim either. Instead, it is up to society at large to work together with the victim to address the oppression and to interrogate their own role in the matter.

Vivian's commitment to the affirmation of being in her support for Penelope despite her own triggers further emphasizes the necessity of one's practice of centering being to counter histories of abuse and trauma. When Vivian and Penelope visit Penelope's mother, it is revealed that Penelope lied about her name, a fact which Vivian chooses to block out along with Penelope's unburdening of her own personal traumas: "From here, I can choose the syllables I

like and let the rest trickle down my face. When her words slow to a dribble and sobs take their place, I put the shell in my lap and pat her back again" (160). Despite the deep discomfort of witnessing Penelope and her mothers' fight, along with Penelope's descriptions of the abuses of her mother, Vivian extends kindness and acceptance to Penelope, indicating her desire to affirm Penelope's being despite Vivian's difficulty in separating lasting trauma from her present moment. These moments of small kindness are Vivian's careful and thoughtful way of expressing radical centering of aliveness in the place of abuse or marginalization.

As I conclude, I would like to return to a moment early in the novel in which Vivian and Penelope's intimacy underscores the role oneness plays in the resistance of silence and the establishment of identity and personhood. Speaking to the aliveness possessed in the relationality of asserting one as not individuality, but collective being, Quashie says, "As such, one is not individual but is personal, an instance of aliveness. What a beautiful rendering of a beautiful instance of a human being being of and in her oneness" (46). After her first interaction with Penelope, a meeting at a café, Vivian is overjoyed that she was able to hold a conversation and make strides towards friendship. Following this interaction, Vivian is in a celebratory mood, stating, "My legs are too excited to sit down and the day hasn't yet been emptied of light, so I decide to visit my thin places—places in which non-humans might live, potential gateways to the world I came from. My parents used force to try and shunt me back to this Otherworld; I will use willing" (31). Vivian's friendship with Penelope deepens her own identification and allows her agency in her changeling identity. Though neither woman has yet revealed their personal histories, they are deeply drawn to one another, propelling Vivian to visit the portals to the Otherworld, a decision deeply contrasting the trauma connected to her parents' attempts to send her to the Otherworld. As Vivian's changeling identity is both a tool of abuse and a means of

expressing her neurodivergence, her shift agency in seeking the Otherworld indicates the incredibly personal nature of her and Penelope's relationship. Vivian and Penelope's collective being is rooted in their community within one another, and their intimacies express aliveness in such a way that protects their being and safely breaches silences, calling attention to violence and creating opportunities for care and aid.

Conclusion

The works of Claire Keegan, Eimear McBride, and Caitriona Lally each provide an approach to centering aliveness as a means of resistance to marginalization. Asserting aliveness and being allows contemporary Irish women authors to counteract the silence of deeply embedded violences in Irish culture. Reading each novel within a framework of aliveness contributes to the assertion of agency of the characters in spite of their proximity to patriarchal violences and traumas. The novelists also reveal the urgency of centering aliveness in one's own approaches to countering violence in contemporary Ireland. Movements to protect the vulnerable should resist centering the historical violences inflicted on Irish girls, women, and other vulnerable populations, instead centering the aliveness and agency of Irish individuals. Reduction to victimhood allows silence to persist. Instead, Keegan, McBride, and Lally offer methods of breaching silence and enacting aliveness in activism, memory, and community.

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