



Holding on to ‘Rites, Rhythms and Rituals’: Mike McCormack’s Homage to Small Town Irish Life and Death

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Marcus Conway is dead. The heart attack that killed him on November 2, All Soul’s Day is something that he is not ready to acknowledge. Before he can come to terms with his own loss, he must also dismantle the loss of the Celtic Tiger and the impact this has had on the rites, rhythms and rituals of his rural life in Louisburgh, Mayo. Returning to his home, through the landscape of rural Ireland in that liminal space between life and death, he re-assembles the memories of his life so that he can then visualise and accept his own loss. As an engineer, he must try to rebuild his lost life, make sense of the failed Celtic Tiger. Like his father before him dismantling the Massey Ferguson tractor, he succumbs ‘to the temptation to take something apart just to see how it was put together, to know intimately what it was he had put his faith in’ (McCormack 2016, pp. 24–25). He must go ‘way beyond’ just reconstruction, but actually ‘know intimately’ and understand why something ‘so complex and

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highly achieved’ as the economic bubble, as his own life ‘could prove so vulnerable, so easily collapsed’ so easily lost. He goes through a range of emotions familiar to those dealing with the fall of the Celtic Tiger, described by Negra and Tasker: ‘involving competing discourses of anger, nostalgia, denial, and loss’ before applying his skills as an engineer to deconstruct the loss through nostalgia, memory and tradition (Negra and Tasker 2013, p. 15). Like the bell that opens the book, it is the rights, rhythms and rituals of rural life that Marcus turns to as tangible markers that offer stability in the face of such loss. These markers guide him through the landscape and memories of his life, helping him to piece together what has happened, to him and to the country. Described by Ian Sansom in his *Guardian* review as a ‘hymn to modern small-town life [...] as well as an indictment of human greed and stupidity, and how places and cultures respond to the circumstances beyond their control and yet of their own making’ (Sansom 2016), *Solar Bones* explores how all the ‘rites, rhythms and rituals’ uphold the world.

THE COLLAPSE OF THE CELTIC TIGER

In the opening pages of *Solar Bones*, just minutes after his own death, one of the first things Marcus mentions is the crash. The banking bailout of the previous year, 2008, is at the forefront of Marcus’s thoughts. He is unable to make sense of this new Ireland that emerged overnight from the now famous bailout of September 29. Marcus describes the new Ireland represented in graphs and figures as ‘some barren, inverse world—a negative realm that over time, will suck the life out of us’ (McCormack 2016, p. 14). The collapse of the Celtic Tiger and the subsequent bank bailout was what Peadar Kirby describes as a ‘rude awakening’ for the people of Ireland (2010, p. 1). Kirby’s book *Celtic Tiger in Collapse* explains how far the Irish economy fell, detailing how the population now:

[H]ad to adjust to the realities of being not only in one of the most severe economic downturns in the European Union but in a depression that was estimated by the prestigious Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) would see Ireland’s economy contract by around 14 per cent between 2008 and 2010. (Kirby 2010, p. 1)

In fact, he goes on to say, that the ESRI described it as a ‘truly dramatic development’ as we moved from budget surplus to having to ‘the worst

position in the EU in terms of its budget Deficit' (Kirby 2010, p. 1). Over reliance on foreign investment, a housing bubble and an irresponsible banking system, all led to what Gerry Smyth calls an 'extreme assault' on Irish identity, as everything that created the Celtic Tiger had to be questioned (Smyth 2012, p. 134). Smyth goes on to say that 'the 2008 crash represents a watershed moment—a fall, certainly, but also an opportunity to rethink the meaning of Irishness' (2012, p. 136).

This is certainly the case for Marcus, the collapse is a watershed moment for him. It is in his mind directly after his death. As an engineer for the County Council, decisions he made, projects he managed, the politicians he worked with were all complicit in causes of the crash; and yet, he still cannot understand:

Just how outsized the nation's financial folly was in the years leading up to the collapse, debt piling up till it ran to tens of billions, incredible figures for a small island economy, awe-inspiring magnitudes which shifted forever the horizons of what we thought ourselves liable for.... (McCormack 2016, p. 13)

The country that he helped to build is now a landscape filled with reminders of the financial folly of the Celtic Tiger years. The inflated growth followed by the huge collapse is of a magnitude that Marcus cannot comprehend, and like the figures and graphs that now represent his present, the lines of identity have shifted. He has lost his understanding of what it means to be Irish. The crash has caused him to question everything he knows, because the life he knew, the country he has lived in, the relationships he made are no longer built on solid foundations: the crash has damaged all he has taken for granted. He criticises the prophets that were 'struck dumb and blind' and 'robbed of all foresight' of the warnings but knows that 'pointing out flaws was never going to be enough and figures and projections, no matter how dire, were never likely to map out the real contours of the calamity' (McCormack 2016, p. 14). This calamity is not just graphs and figures, but linked to the people and the landscape. This is a failure that runs deep into the contours of the country, making the causes of the loss harder to define. Kieran Allen suggests that Ireland's economic collapse can 'be presented as a textbook case for the failures of neoliberalism' (Allen 2012, p. 425). Allen explains that the Irish economy was based on a property bubble that was inflated way beyond sustainability:

At the height of the boom, Ireland was building the equivalent of 21 housing units per 1,000 of the population compared with an average of 7 in the rest of Europe [...] Close ties developed between bankers, property speculators and the Fianna Fáil party and the state actively supported the construction boom through tax breaks and restrictions on social housing [...] This level of reckless lending was made possible by the Irish state's enthusiastic embrace of neoliberal policies. (Allen 2012, pp. 423–424)

This shock at how deep the corruption and mismanagement ran was shared by many countrywide, claims Gerry Smyth. In 2012, Smyth speaking three years after the setting of this novel, claims that 'the waves from that momentous, ignominious fall are still crashing on the shores of the Irish consciousness today. The levels of corruption, ignorance, incompetence and sheer stupidity that precipitated economic disaster shocked everyone' (Smyth 2012, p. 136). For Marcus, just one year after this bank bailout was announced and the scale of the collapse was emerging, this shock is still raw. All that was lost is fresh in his mind and things must be 'settled' before he can allow himself to succumb to that final loss (McCormack 2016, p. 4). The trauma of the crash, and his own death, creates what Caruth calls a 'breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world' and it is in that breach between life and death that Marcus is trying to come to terms with the trauma of loss (Caruth 1996, p. 4). The trauma is coming back to haunt him because he has been unable to understand it.

RETURN TO STABILITY

His need to settle things and run checks in order to cross that 'threshold' brings him back to a memory of deconstruction: his father disassembling the tractor on their family farm when he was a young boy. Seeing a complex machine taken apart, separated into its component parts is described by Marcus as his 'first moment of anxious worry about the world', a moment that allows him to see the bigger picture, how the world is local and national at the same time. He describes this moment as 'the first instance of my mind spiralling beyond the immediate environs of hearth, home and parish, towards the wider world, way beyond' (McCormack 2016, p. 62). In his review, Rob Doyle explains that this memory 'rekindles a childhood apprehension of the chaos and fragility of the natural world' (Doyle and McCormack 2016). The 'most essential

parts', the tractor lies on the floor of the shed waiting to be restored to 'harmonic' working order, once his father understands how this complex machine operates. Marcus too lays out the memories of his life, and how it connects with not only the landscape but the crash. He hopes, like his father before him with the tractor, that breaking down his lost life into its component parts, he can restore it to its harmony:

I knew well that this dismantlement went beyond a fitters examination of a diesel engine, well beyond stripping out the carburettor to clear the jets—once again my father had succumbed to the temptation to take something apart just to see how it was put together, to know intimately what it was he had put his faith in.... (McCormack 2016, p. 62)

In order to 'know intimately' what has happened to Ireland, he must pick it apart; see how his locality is connected nationally. As an engineer, Marcus tells us his 'life and works concerned itself with scale and accuracy, mapping and surveying so that the grid of reason and progress could be laid across the earth' (McCormack 2016, p. 62). The complexity of the economy, the crash and his own death is intertwined with his memory, and as an engineer, he unpacks all of this and creates some sense of scale and order. To map these complexities will allow him to regain the lost identities, the identities that suffered what Gerry Smyth describes as an 'extreme assault' in post-crash Ireland. He must gut it of its essential parts and leave it 'forlorn' on the floor. He has to find the lost connection between the land, the economy and the personal, as imagined in the bread knife he received as a wedding present. Seeing the knife, Marcus can unpack this connection from its beginnings 'in the murk of prehistory as a blunt river cobble or shard of flint, through all its brittle bronze and ferric variants... till it arrived safely in her hand' (McCormack 2016, p. 140). This connection is obvious in the handle of the knife which 'had become rounded and worn with the bevelled edges of the ash handle faintly bleached from continual washing' (McCormack 2016, p. 141). The relationship here can be measured and seen, but it is not as simple for his own life, and the Irish economic crash.

In order to unpack this, he has to remember, but as Emilie Pine has said 'to remember is not a straightforward injunction' (Pine 2011, p. 3) and the narrative structure of *Solar Bones* reflects this journey through Marcus's memory and the surrounding landscape. The stream of consciousness style mirrors the landscape that Marcus moves through,

mirroring the economic fragmentation around him. Sharae Deckard describes the ‘indented lines’ of the text ‘like structural seams and joints in the architecture of his memory, opening cracks that deepen as he recognises his impending dematerialisation, even as the Irish economy dissolves around him’ (Deckard 2016). These memories are like lost pieces of a jigsaw, like the parts of the tractor that he must come to know intimately before he can piece them together again and make sense of the world.

He is led by the rites and rhythms of rural life on this journey, and the opening lines alert us to the importance of the traditional to life, and, in particular, to rural life, as the church bell rings out across Louisburgh:

the bell
the bell as
hearing the bell as
hearing the bell as standing here
the bell being heard standing here. (McCormack 2016, p. 7)

From the very beginning, all convention is lost, there is no capital letter, no full stop, the sentence does not end for another 223 pages. This is not a straightforward memory narrative, but rather a journey through memory and loss. He is taking apart his memory, his shattered identity in the hope of seeing all that has been lost:

were we so blind to the world teetering on the edge that we never straightened up from what we were doing to consider things more clearly or have we lost completely that brute instinct for catastrophe, that sensitivity now buried too deep beneath reason and manners to register but which, once upon a time, was alert to the first whining vibrations radiating from those stress points likely to give away first.... (McCormack 2016, p. 20)

The opening angelus bell gives Marcus something to rely on. It is noon, it is a weekday, and his wife is at work. The bell alerts him to the locality, gives him a sense of place, streets and fields that are familiar to him; spaces that literally and figuratively ground him, because here in Louisburgh ‘all its doors and shop-fronts are familiar’ to him and ‘every pole and kerbstone along its length recognisable to me’. The landscape gives him a sense of self:

this street a given
 this street something to rely on
 fount and ground
 one of those places where someone will pass who can say of me
 yes, I know this man. (McCormack 2016, p. 11)

He lists out all the ways that people might know him: the facts of his life; his family; his career; his education; his home. There is a sense of ownership to this landscape; Marcus tells us it is his: this particular street is mine, mine in the sense of having walked it thousands of times (McCormack 2016, pp. 11–12). It is here in this rural village in the west of Ireland that he can trace his roots back 'to a time when it was nothing more than a ramshackle river crossing of a few smoky homesteads [...] my line traceable to the gloomy prehistory' (McCormack 2016, p. 9). He is rooted in the place, part of the landscape; there is a certainty to who he is in this landscape and the sounds that emanate from this place. He follows the sound of the bell through this place that is 'fount and ground'; from the natural to the man-made, circling back through the landscape 'over its villages and townlands, over the fields and hills and bogs in between'. The chimes of the bell summon the parish together, fill the void and:

gathers this parish together though all its primary and secondary
 roads with

 all its schools and football pitches
 all its bridges and graveyards
 all its shops and pubs
 the builder's yard and health clinic
 the community centre
 the water treatment plant and
 the handball alley
 the made world with
 all the focal points around which a parish like this gathers itself as
 surely as
 the world itself did at the beginning of time, through
 mountains, rivers and lakes. (McCormack 2016, pp. 8–9)

The sounds of the bell follows the 'contours of the landscape' and 'make their way and in the middle of which stands the village of Louisburgh' (McCormack 2016, p. 9). It is the rhythm of the bell that ties together

the man-made to the landscape. A rhythm that he can focus on as he awakens from his death, into some kind of purgatory meditation on loss between life and death; collapse and recovery; chaos and harmony. The bells lead him through the landscape to a list of stable items that Marcus can depend on. As the local County Council engineer, he was probably responsible for the planning and development of much of the man-made additions to the landscape. These are his landmarks in more ways than one. And the bells are that of the local Catholic Church, markers of traditional Irish Catholic identity. In 2006, 86.8% of the Irish population identified as Catholic in the census, and more in rural areas. The Church is a landmark of Irish identity, particularly for Marcus, a rural Irish man in his 50s. The bells of the angelus, heard twice a day, call, according to the 2006 census, 86% of the population to prayer and reflection and Marcus can now reflect on the fragments before him.

Order has always been important to Marcus, in times of trauma he turns to order. After his affair, his wife Mairead returns to her parental home and Marcus is left at home in what he describes as the ‘dirt and disarray of the single man’s existence’ (McCormack 2016, p. 141). She refuses to see him and Marcus returns to his home alone and is shocked at the mess of his kitchen and its ‘deepening filth’ thinking it said ‘something about’ his ‘state of mind’. He has not taken responsibility for the chaos, or indeed, the pain he has caused his wife and it only through putting order on this mess that the impasse between himself and Mairead can be resolved:

because in truth what really tormented me was that all this filth and disorder offended my engineer’s sense of structure, everything out of place and proper alignment, everything gathering towards some point of chaos beyond which it would be impossible to restore the place to its proper order and yet I stood looking at it, locked into a silent battle with the house itself and all the things which were slowly vacating their proper place, furniture and dishes and cutlery all over the place, curtains hanging awry and chairs and tables strewn about while books and papers slid across the floor, everything slowly shifting through the house as if they had a meeting to keep somewhere else, possibly in some higher realm where all this chaos would resolve into a refined harmony which had no need of my hand or intervention. (McCormack 2016, pp. 141–142)

The silent battle is repeated again after the trauma of his death. He must take a look over the ‘chaos’ left behind by the crash and try to restore some ‘proper order’ in order to come to some understanding about his

life and identity. Everything he had trusted and understood is no longer in its 'proper place' and now that he is in some 'higher realm', he can try and place some structure on this chaos from beyond the grave. It is only in death that he can see the chaos clearly; this time, however, his view includes not only his home but the land and life that surrounds it.

PASTORAL

The bell which calls Marcus to the landscape and asks him to take stock, is a certainty of place that McCormack feels is important. These items Marcus lists out assist him in verifying himself, the facts of his life that he can depend on, what he describes as 'the articles of faith which verify me and upon which I have built a life in this parish with all its work and rituals for the best part of five decades' (McCormack 2016, p. 12). McCormack too requires a sense of stability when creating his narrative worlds as he tells the *New Statesman*: 'Once I have that area under my feet, once I'm sure and certain of that area, I have no problem writing about ghosts, or about spaceships, aliens, robots—anything becomes possible. It's familiar in the sense of knowledge, and of certainty' (McCormack 2016a). It is this sense of the familiar that Marcus craves as his mind spirals out of control trying to comprehend his own death and the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. Once that stable footing is achieved, Marcus, like McCormack can explore the things that are not certain, that are unstable. It is the rituals of rural life that Marcus needs in order to explore and understand his loss. He must once again travel through the landscape and gather together the things he does not understand.

The return to the landscape is a familiar location for Irish literature in times of trauma and change. *Solar Bones* plays to these origins; even the narrative style speaks to what Oona Frawley describes as Irish literature's beginnings in oral narrative, because as she explains: 'memory would clearly be of utmost significance in an orally passed-on tradition' (Frawley 1998, p. 270). *Solar Bones* looks and feels very much like an internal oral narrative. Thoughts and memories are fluid in this 223-page, one-sentence novel. This novel fits with what Frawley had described as 'a verbal charting of not only the physical but also the social landscape' because of McCormack's fragmented, oral style and forefronting of memory in the novel (Frawley 1998, p. 268).

However, the return to the traditional is not just confined to the narrative style, but is also seen in the need to remember. Marcus has an

affection for the past: nostalgia for what was lost in the crash. Frawley sees nostalgia as a way to preserve the past and make sense of the present. ‘In allowing the past, by way of memory and longing, to filter into the present, nostalgia serves to bridge the two effectively; allowing an individual, or even an entire generation, to adapt to change’ (Frawley 1998, p. 270). The certainty of place provides stability in a time of chaos, what Allen describes as the ‘calamitous collapse’ (Allen 2012, p. 422). Nostalgia is the bridge between Marcus’s life and death. It is here in this liminal space on the day of the dead that he can allow the past, through memory and nostalgia to seep in and inform his present. This nostalgia for the rites, rhythms and rituals of life allows Marcus the chance to understand the loss that has collapsed his life and the Irish economy.

The trauma of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, as well as Marcus’s own death, causes him to turn to memory and nostalgia, to these rites and rituals in order to make sense of his current situation. As McCormack points out, the certainty of place allows him to explore any theme, and this is the same for Marcus. The list of places and spaces of his locality give him a solid foundation to begin his meditation. Frawley sees this as a trope of Irish literature dealing with change:

In the face of a changing or threatened social structure, place and nature can be conceived of as a steady and unaltered realm beyond the reaches of the fluctuating culture, and it is for this reason that I believe Irish literature so frequently uses the natural world as a site for nostalgia. (Frawley 1998, p. 270)

In the wake of dramatic collapse, the landscape offers stability. This is not specific to McCormack and *Solar Bones*, Derek Hand writing in *A History of the Irish Novel* suggests that Colum McCann also sees the landscape of Ireland in his writing as ‘offering a bedrock of stability and continuity, the discourses that surround it tell a story of dislocation and fragmentation’ (Hand 2011, p. 277). Marcus uses the stability of the landscape to allow him to deal with the chaos and begin to disassemble the parts of his life, as his father did with the tractor in the shed on their farm. In order to engage with the fragmentation that has dislocated him, Marcus must first find continuity in the landscape to piece together what it means to be Irish and learn what has been lost.

This turn to the pastoral in Frawley’s sense of the word is definitely steeped in nostalgia. Marcus’s interest in rites, rhythms, and rituals

is linked to nostalgia, to the past, to tradition, a time before the crash, where he felt stability. Frawley tells us that the origins of the term nostalgia was the longing of homesickness. Marcus is a man who can never go home again, either physically or figuratively. He can never reclaim Ireland as it was before, like his life, it is lost. He is in that ‘reverie-like state of remembrance for experiences which, as past, are unrecoverable’ that Frawley describes (Frawley 1998, p. 270). Existing in that liminal space between life and death, Marcus embarks on a journey of nostalgia and memory on the day of the dead.

THE ENGINEER

Marcus reminds us throughout that he is an engineer, and that his job is to create order and structure. His skills as an engineer will assist him in structuring the chaos around him, putting order on the loss, the nostalgia and memory. He hopes, in a manner similar to the case of his father’s tractor that, disassembled, looked like ‘an instrument of chaos’ that once reassembled, he can ‘recognise the engineering elegance of it all’ (McCormack 2016, p. 25). The chaos of the crash; its refusal to be ordered, is something Marcus cannot grasp. As an engineer, he has a responsibility to the landscape, and the decisions he makes have long-term impacts, as he tells Deputy Moylette. In their argument over the building of a new school, Marcus explains that there is a ‘difference between a politician and engineer’, pointing out that Moylette’s ‘decisions have only to hold up for four or five years—one electoral cycle and you are acclaimed a hero—but my decisions need a longer lifespan than that or my reputation is in shreds’ (McCormack 2016, p. 167). He refuses to sign off on the clearance certificate because of his engineering principles: ‘No engineer can sign off’ he tells Moylette, but this is exactly what has happened throughout the Celtic Tiger bubble. He explains to Mairead that while he might object and refuse to sign the certificate that ‘politics will trump engineering’ because ‘electoral pressure will ensure that this gets built sooner or later with or without my name on it’. Politics will ensure that the principled engineer will be disregarded Marcus tells Mairead: ‘The whole thing will get smudged, the cert could go missing or the county manager will probably take it out of my hands and the whole thing will go through on a nod and wink’ (McCormack 2016, p. 169).

Marcus has so much respect for his position that when the collapse of the Celtic Tiger exposes the mismanagement of the country, he is in

shock. Moylette's warning to him that 'engineers don't make the world, you should know that more than anyone, politics and politicians make the world' once again highlights the corruption that led to the bubble and subsequent crash (McCormack 2016, p. 167), and this is where the issue is for Marcus: politicians make decisions based on elections, rather than the longer-term impact on the community and landscape. The politicians have made this world that Marcus is trying to understand from that space between life and death. They have created this inflated bubble and the collapse that followed. However, in order to do so, engineers had to assist them, had to respond to the 'squeeze' that Marcus feels and, as a result, disrespect his work which he believes is 'on the side of human betterment' (McCormack 2016, p. 174). This career which he sees as something he had 'believed in', that was a vocation—has also let him down upon his reflection (McCormack 2016, pp. 174–175). This too has been lost to the collapse.

CRISIS OF THE BODY

The severity of the crash is also manifested on his wife's body. Mairead is left bedridden for weeks after drinking water infected with cryptosporidium. Marcus becomes her carer over the weeks while the virus passes and as her body purges itself of the 'bitter filth sluicing up out of her' that is so deeply embedded in her. This pain of this crisis is inscribed on the body; it must be wrenched free. In her review, Sharae Deckard suggests that Mairead's sickness is an important piece for Marcus as he looks over the parts of his life and his country. Her illness, in his liminal retrospective, becomes a moment of epiphany:

Observing his tormented wife, Marcus has his own moment of revelation when he recognises that 'history and politics were now a severe intestinal disorder,' no longer 'blithe abstractions or pallid concepts', like the graphs and statistics of the financial crisis which hardly seem to map the violence of its effects. The 'real' of history is 'spliced' into her body, but so too is the prospect of transformation of reality. (Deckard 2016)

Her illness becomes a symbol for the trauma of the crash, but is also directly related to the ineptitude that symbolises the Celtic Tiger. This is a body in pain that is suffering because institutions have failed and are not listening to those rites, rhythms and rituals of Irish life. Mairead's

body is, as Dillane et al. say: a 'suffering metaphorical' body that testifies 'to systemic and structural political violence' (Dillane et al. 2016, p. 2). The pain can communicate the loss, much more than the many news reports that Marcus reads or listens to on a daily basis. This pained body disrupts his routine, his rituals, and speaks to him through the physical act of caring for his wife. Rob Boddice explains that the pained body can articulate much more:

As we translate bodily experience into words, grimaces and art—as we make metaphors of our inner experiences—we literally 'figure out' what we feel. These figures may lack definition, but they are no less evocative for that. And just as I 'figure out' how I feel, so my witness reads my figures, checks them against her own and, to some degree, understands. (Boddice 2014, pp. 1–2)

Mairead's illness is similar to the disassembled tractor. As Marcus recalls the experience of caring for his wife over the previous few days and weeks before his own death, he must piece together the memories and, as Boddice suggests, 'figure out' what this illness means. As he re-witnesses her body in pain, he can come to some understanding. Through this repetition of witnessing and subsequent re-sharing of his wife's illness with his children, neighbours and friends, Marcus comes to see this connection between the personal and the political. As Dillane et al. suggest, there is 'always' an 'unresolvable tension [...] between the physical experience of pain and the critical analysis of that pain; between the articulation of pain, its communicative potential and its remediation (Dillane et al. 2016, p. 3), and for Marcus and his children, this is definitely the case. They find it difficult to know how to react to the situation that has left Mairead's body in pain. Until his death, Marcus is unable to resolve this tension. Watching the news, he is eager for someone to blame, looking for a simple solution, and he is shocked that this cannot be offered:

It seemed to me wholly beyond belief now that after all this time no one or no cause had been identified as the course of the crisis, no one point to and say this person and their actions are the reason my wife is in bed with her strength leaking from every pore of her body, sour dreams of revenge coming to torment me which seemed reasonable and justified but, with no proper focus for my wrath, i proved to be a poor hand at revenge fantasies'. (McCormack 2016, p. 193)

Marcus fails to turn his anger into action, to assign blame. Like the bank bailout the previous year, rather than take action, faith is maintained in the institutions responsible for the crisis. Those that caused it will not be brought to justice.

His son Darragh cannot comprehend ‘what the hell were the city engineers doing’ and the ‘human slobberiness of the world’ (McCormack 2016, p. 31). However, for Marcus, the important thing is that they ‘find the cause’ and ‘fix it before the whole thing escalates’ (McCormack 2016, p. 31). He believes at the start of this cryptosporidium crisis that it can be solved easily through the proper channels, those institutions that he has always put his faith in, however, he comes to realise that these are the very institutions that have let him down. As the crisis continues; as the engineers fail to find identify the source of the contamination, Marcus’s daughter Agnes, whom he tells us had ‘never voiced political opinion whatsoever’ brings together the personal and the political in her response (McCormack 2016, p. 187). She is moved to action by the ‘incompetence of the city authorities’. Marcus is surprised by her anger and interest as ‘she was of that generation born to a world of plenty, never knowing what it was to do without or what it was to be frugal and therefore never having developed the coping skills to deal with any reversal, economic or political’ (McCormack 2016, p. 187). Unlike Marcus, she refuses to accept this ‘reversal’, this incompetence, but rather is spurred into immediate action, unlike the city authorities of which she is so critical. She had ‘finally woken up to the world’ in comparison to Marcus, and the institutions he works for, who accept the situation and expect it will get better. Agnes, like her father in his liminal meditation, lists out all the facts as comprehensively as possible in order to be ‘inclusive and exhaustive, a sort of vanquishing spell set against it’ (McCormack 2016, p. 188). These component parts help her make sense of the crisis and decide her course of action.

Agnes uses her body to make a political statement, jumping from the edge of a building into a concealed air cushion in front of City Hall. The building behind her, responsible for the outbreak is covered with a white tarpaulin, and as she rises up, blue waves are projected onto her naked white body. The political becomes personal, the landscape and the body one. These events help Marcus connect the dots, understand that the body is connected and that these bodies need to ‘rise up and start a political and social renewal, startle the people out of their torpor’ (McCormack 2016, p. 201).

CONCLUSION

In facing the greatest loss of all, Marcus must return to the basic components of what a life means. He has to break down his life into all its elements: 'father, husband, citizen' and allow his body to succumb to the 'rhythms of decay' (McCormack 2016, p. 222). Searching for stability as he faces the unknown, Marcus begins his 'post mortem aria' his 'engineer's lament' with the rites, rituals and rhythms of rural life. Allowing the bells of All Souls day to carry him through the landscape and his memory, he finds a certainty that allows him to survey the chaos of the collapse of the Celtic Tiger and place an order on the pieces of his life that make him 'man and boy, father and son, husband and engineer' allowing him to find connection and understanding of the life and the land, the personal and the political. He must allow himself, in this liminal space to drift through the chaos and accept 'no more accuracy, all his angles titled to infinity' (McCormack 2016, p. 221). And in this release, this acceptance of loss, of change, he can say that 'I have known it to be a sacred and beautiful place, hallowed by human endeavour and energies, crossed with love and the continual wave of human circumstance' and leave behind the certainties of life (McCormack 2016, p. 221). Once he succumbs to this loss, he will have to leave behind the 'markings or contours to steer by' and the 'songs to sing' him home (McCormack 2016, p. 223).

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