

BOOK REVIEWS

Words of the Grey Wind: Family and Epiphany in Ulster. By Chris Arthur. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2009. xv + 253 pp. £12.99, paper.

Irish Elegies. By Chris Arthur. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. x + 184 pp. \$80.00.

Gaze long enough into memory's starlight, and the mind fashions a prism of rumination, spilling the spectrum across contemplation's page. Look up, and the page disappears, just for a moment, and there you are, time-traveler, whirling your arms like some miniature galaxy, speeding away from the moment in time you had wanted to fix like the dot of ink at the end of the sentence. This is what it's like to follow the work of Chris Arthur, a meditative essayist for whom the spectrum is broad indeed, reaching each frequency, sounding a single note until you suddenly notice that, as in a Tibetan monk's throat song, he has come to sound two notes at once, or several, and you vibrate, too, with the energy of connection. Memoir, memory, the accretive gravitational force of associative thought—in Arthur's accomplished hands, the essay becomes a mosaic of meditation, simultaneously illuminated by the singular light of an examined moment and the zodiacal light of time's broad ecliptic.

It's hard not to turn to extended metaphor to describe Arthur's work—can you tell? In part this is because he's so skillful with comparison, the descriptive tools of figurative language always at hand. Here's a scattering of examples from both these collections: "Like almost everyone, I picked up language like a dog running through a field of burrs"; a single phrase "has become a kind of aural familiar that I'm sure will always haunt me . . . something rooted deeply in the loam of remembering [that] produces a regular crop of recall"; "We are so entwined with the world that to think us capable of offering an account of it unmarked by the shadow of our presence is as odd a conceit as supposing fish could engineer a land-dweller's vision of the ocean"; "To unravel the warp and woof of history, unpicking the fabric of the present and feeling back along each thread across the years, is as difficult a skill as drawing threads from a carver into line, where the slightest carelessness, a cut or tie in the wrong place, will result in unsightly tatters." This last, drawn from a consideration of his grandmother's handiwork with Irish linen, also

illustrates the frequent use he makes of Irish experience, something I'll return to in a moment.

But to suggest that these are simply tools, bits of technology designed for a particular desired effect, is of course misleadingly reductive. At its best (and much of both these volumes is utterly superlative), creative prose draws on the great transformative reservoir that lies beneath purpose and intent. And that is Arthur's real project, in all his work: to find a path, through the dailiness of living, to that wellspring. Each essay becomes an account, through the mapping of language, of the path itself, as well as a very long drink from the (re)discovered waters. As Phillip Lopate reminds us in his anthology of essays, the author's "example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish." Arthur reminds American readers that our own post-9/11 anxieties are just one way of living with the shadow of terrorism cast across our days—the "Troubles" of Ulster darken his gaze into the Irish landscape and life rhythms of his childhood.

We learn from him Irish-inflected language, like "tinchel," a human circle "formed by a group of hunters to ring their prey at an unthreatening distance and then, slowly, to approach closer and closer, drawing in the circle until escape was impossible." In "A Tinchel Round My Father" (*Words*), Arthur considers the photographs of his father's albums, pictorial artifacts of that peculiar time in his—by example, our—parents' lives before they became the very identity by which we know them. Was the aim "to elucidate a more widespread human trait"? By the essay's end, as is so often the case, he's gone through a wormhole of human perspective and is glimpsing even beyond the limits of our own humanity. "Is everything interconnected, species with species, planet with planet, person with person, photograph with photograph?" he asks. Drawing gently on Buddhist thought, Arthur certainly implies a willingness to accept *yes* as an answer, which means that the tinchel metaphor is problematic: one cannot, ultimately, separate thought's prey from the herd, or from the landscape into which it may slip away, invisible, at any moment. Yet the quest is essential. The tinchel was developed as an "ancient technique of deer hunting used long ago in Ireland," Arthur says, implying the life-or-death necessity of the hunt. Ultimately, he remains agnostic: the nature of connection also eludes us, however much we may feel its presence.

Although narrative is a primary drive in contemporary American nonfiction, followed at something of a safe distance by argument,

meditation is the central mode in Arthur's work. Of course he calls on narrative, but it is in the service of meditation; to adopt the metaphor of the linen carver, the nap of the cloth is meditation, while the details that draw the eye may include the stories recalled from the past. Etymology, natural history, national history, and the story of personal witness (like the day he overheard a young Irish terrorist conversing with a bookstore owner): the stories Arthur gathers into his meditations place the personal moment within the great swath of time itself. The voice is intelligent but familiar; the project is keenly ambitious.

Words of the Grey Wind is itself a collection culled from Arthur's volumes *Irish Nocturnes*, *Irish Willow*, and *Irish Haiku* (with the addition of three new essays). *Irish Elegies* makes a welcome addition to his *Irish* series. Either would serve as an excellent introduction to the work of this prolific and rewarding essayist; each contains work that may be familiar to regular readers of *Southern Humanities Review* (as well as many other literary journals and the *Best American Essays* series). I want to look at two exemplary essays, one from each book, that indicate Arthur's power as a meditative rather than narrative writer, for whom the segmented essay's form allows for remarkable compression of intimate and universal detail.

"Meditation on the Pelvis of an Unknown Animal" (*Words*) opens with the kind of particular detail of personal experience which Lopate considers "a single hot coal" drawn from "the volcano of the self." For Arthur, the coal is an owl pellet collected in childhood, picked apart to reveal "a tiny femur, rib, or scapula," and the memory of the objects laid out on the windowsill like "some miniature ossuary." From that childhood window ledge, he moves effortlessly into contemplation of the "pull of bones," the passion we harbor for certain forms. We are now in the realm of the archetype, informed by the wide spread of geologic time, yet (here the monk's voice sounds the second note) considering the aesthetic concerns of modernity. Arthur turns attention to Georgia O'Keeffe's pelvis series, noting how her vision is informed by twentieth-century surrealism yet maintains a distance from Magritte or Dali: "The paintings have a sense of looking through a powerful microscope at the mysterious sepulchral structure of cells and nuclei, at atoms and their dizzying particles, at the very stuff, the hidden infrastructure, of life itself."

Fortified with O'Keeffe's example, Arthur recounts finding "an enormous pelvis wedged among some rocks on the shore near Fifeness" on Scotland's North Sea coast. "[I]t was as if the ocean, like

some terrible owl, had disgorged from its innards a single shard of bone from one of its victims.” The meditation turns and returns, coiling on itself, recounting Arthur’s efforts to clean the bone of its “mould and slime,” the “gobbets of flesh, pale, putrid and unidentifiable with anything alive.” We consider the story of the Buddha ordering a young monk to meditate on the decaying corpse of his suddenly dead beloved, to glimpse the flesh-embedded warning about attachment. We turn again, standing in Arthur’s childhood, in a neglected and unaccountably unlocked crypt in County Down (“the place has since become associated with one of Ulster’s most brutal massacres”), where with “a small tribe of cousins” he blundered in to find the fleshless remains of human death. We recoil, turn, and return to adulthood’s contemplation of childhood’s vision. Arthur considers O’Keeffe’s paintings as “authentic, non-partisan religious art of a sort that is badly needed,” suggesting “[t]he immensity of time, and the multiplicity of creatures that went before us.” Around a central core of potent images—bone, feather, fossil—Arthur structures the body of his epiphanic meditation, arriving at both “diurnal intellection” and “a silent gliding deep into the heart of things.”

“Thirty-six Views, None of Mount Fuji” (*Elegies*) explores and tests the essay’s capacity to present an analogue of visual culture. His announced model is the eighteenth-nineteenth century Japanese painter Hokusai, whose two great series, *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* and, later, *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*, presented the artist’s quest to prolong his life through contemplation of the mythologically infused symbol of longevity, the nearly immortal mountain. Arthur claims “kinship” with this “Japanese progenitor” in a series of image-rich passages, each formally distinguished by roman numerals, that consider a maple tree that grew—towered, maybe, due to its age and power in his imagination—in the family garden.

Daylit and moonlit, considered in spring and winter, seen through the window’s frame or felt beneath the hand which, in memory, retraces the “horizontal straight lines” of “disfigurement” where someone must once have affixed a wire fence against the trunk: the maple provides a meditative touchstone. It is an occasion for the kind of thick description Patricia Hampl has recently discussed in “The Dark Art of Description”: it “gives the authorial mind a place to be in relation with the reality of the world.” Ranging in length from three sentences to a few paragraphs, the thirty-eight sections of this essay include prologue, epilogue, and an extra numbered section in

which a “final, non-final view” of the ancestral house on the eve of its sale allows Arthur to consider “the mystery of the mundane and the metaphysics of maples, the nature of belonging and of home, and of displacement.” Mindful of “the artificiality of literary constructs,” Arthur still pursues contact through contemplation, the “register,” as Hampl says, where mind and world meet. Such meetings are imperfect, but in Arthur’s hands they resonate with significance.

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