

THE FOUNDLING CRIB

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FOREWORD

The Foundling Crib was commissioned by Solstice Arts Centre in the Spring of 2020. It draws inspiration from the Dublin 08 landscape in which I found myself during the weeks of the Irish Covid-19 Lockdown. It references various histories attached to the current site of St James's Hospital, specifically that of The City Workhouse established in 1703, which later evolved into the Foundling Hospital and Workhouse of the City of Dublin in 1730, and eventually became the Foundling Hospital in 1772. In 1730 a foundling crib inside a revolving wheel was installed on the site and it is estimated that by 1829, when the Foundling Hospital closed to new admissions, as many as 200,000 infants had passed through.

“Yesterday I knew no lullaby/ But you have taught me overnight to order/ This song, which takes from your final cry/ Its tune, from your unreasoned end its reason...”

—Eavan Boland, from ‘Child of Our Time’

I

By lamplight, an aged map of Dublin reveals the city
as preached by Swift,

scant lanes and alleys that run like ghost-veins pulsing
the blood of women

who once begged for bread and alms,
who cupped their palms to strangers

in Cutthroat Place. In Murdering Lane,
I look down along the black steps

of three centuries or more. I can hear the throb
of water rising out of ling and heather bogs.

Source is another word for *church*.
In Rome the poorest mothers left

infants by the Tiber and later, among the nets,
the fishermen found the tangled bones.

Did they lay these bones out as treasure?
Did they toss them back into water?

Every river knows the weight of hunger.
Anna Liffey gives us back our bodies.

The stories of all our mothers are written
on the inner walls of this city I call home.

II

It began with an omen stone,
laid by the Duchess of Ormond in 1704.

*This is what we do to the poor of this country.
We raise a wall around them, we make of their circumstance*

a living tomb. On the corner of James's Street,
the City Workhouse opened

and in exchange for burgoo bowls, the vagrant inmates
spun and weaved, picked hemp, sawed logs

and fell, at night, like towers into cellar bunks
to dream their waif dreams

of unlit canals, godless thresholds,
the hanging rope in the byre.

When you walk through Dublin, you walk
in the land of the suffering. Sometimes,

I feel the deer of Phoenix Park roam down
onto the edges of my breath.

Shadow gods with shadow lives, coal eyes burning.
What are they trying to tell? What do they know

of fingers and thumbs dipped in a poppy syrup
and slipped into the mouths of dying?

III

In the winter of The Great Frost, a stillness
so cold that even the Liffey tongue grew stiff

for seven long weeks, the potatoes turned to rot
like teeth in some strange parable.

Children stripped bare the orchards, hedges,
ornamental trees. The coal ferries waited in the harbour.

In The Liberties, *a shortage of wheat* the weavers said,
as they shook their heads at wool piled up

and wheels drawn to a stop. No mercy from the landlord.
No mercy from the church.

In McCaffrey's field the cows kneeled down
to rest their bony skulls upon the grass

until the last candles in their eyes went out.
Those men and women with a flame left in their heads

flocked to the living tomb clutching meal-tickets
like pale love-letters to the bone.

What obedient servants hunger makes of us in every faith.
Outside the tomb's entry, the city foundling crib,

rocked back and forth in a blade of east wind.
Leave here your Papist young.

IV

Lord, grant me a mercy other than this mercy.

Down the decades, the unanswered petitions of mothers,

at altars and shrines, withered into wordlessness.

Eight or ten infants in each creel, the women known as *carriers*

strapped the creels onto their backs,

the clean heft of skulls and chests banging like plates.

First, a scrappy wailing and then, no sound at all

along the dim canals,

sometimes day and night, they laboured forward.

They were women with moons in their bellies,

who had scraped the last thin meat

from the bones of the last animal. They picked pockets,

sold flesh and learned how to bear a devil in the head.

Yes, they abandoned infants among the reeds.

Who, now, can judge these cruelties? They carried

dying bodies on their own dying bodies

delivering to the foundling crib, for a fee,

this child who is injured;

this child born with no right arm;

this child who is Black; this child who is starving.

V

One hundred miles Bridget Kearney crossed on foot,
to place her newborn girl into the foundling crib.

Hewn of stone and neatly chiselled,
the bell was rung and, sun or moon,

the wheel revolved. No questions asked.
Hush little bog child

through this blind portal. Did Bridget look
as the wheel turned? Did her hands tremble?

Only the gulls can know the secrets of the dead.
Out of every parish and across the Irish Sea

the women came. On the other side,
the record states what the porter found

looped to infant wrists and toes, talismanic
medals, prayers, names and dates of birth.

Now, where no mother stands, I stand
in the milky scent of a butterfly bush

that springs like a bruise out of the earth.
Winters and winters after the wound

an intercession: *I am not Her. I am mother.*
She is not forgotten. She is my daughter.

VI

The bell was rung. The wheel revolved.

Inside the Workhouse renamed Hospital,

the new foundlings, washed and ink-stamped
on the inner arm, were held up like foreign coins

against the light. A matron made the call:
the best sent out to nurse, the others bound for the infirmary

to suckle on a bottle so heavy with lily, few woke
from the lily dream. The nurses presented corpses

for inspection, under the cover of *rescue and reform*. Wages
for the falling sickness.

Wages for want and cold.
Wages for fits. Wages for death.

Who am I except an eyeless witness treading a cemented site?
Who were these sons and daughters left

in a flowerless grip, to dwindle head-to-toe
in cradles swarming vermin and bugs,

barely covered by a leaf of wool? *Oh Great and eternal Jehovah,*
thy most blessed and holy Word,

that when our fathers and mothers should forsake us,
Thou o Lord didst not forget us.

VII

Did Bridget's girl cry out against the sour air?
Did she dream of distant bogs

beneath the oily watch of her keepers?
Often, the bread was old, the milk turned pale by clouds of water.

Hunger. Hunger. Hunger.
Was she told of William Mills who took a chance

and made a run for it? Of how the breath whirring,
like a wing inside his chest, betrayed the effort in his legs?

Weeping, he was brought back
to the House of Correction.

He was whipped for three days and nights.
He was sent down to the dungeon

and chained to a log like a small boat chained to a rock
in the middle of the ocean.

Those who tried to free him
were tied with rope to a whipping post

in the open street, where dozens gathered
out of the city shadows

to cheer aloud and throw found stones.
Let that be a lesson.

IIX

Take this clock as my word.

Lady Arabella Denny, daughter of the earl,

installed a new milk hour in the Hospital. Briefly,
the nurses ranked these infant mouths

among the cherished. Soon the ink notes began *oh Lady Arabella,*
feed this bone of my thinning bones.

By hand, the older children learned their names on paper.
Out of wood blocks, the boys carved

horses with smooth, round bellies.
The girls raised blameless roses from the earth.

In Windsor cuffs of blue and red, they were marched
in the Dublin streets to the chant

for the foundling parade, turn your pockets inside out.

Some in the crowd threw ruined apples and fistfuls of muck

as the soldiers followed behind in clean lines.
This church is an enemy church.

To London ladies of charity, Arabella gifted
foundling gloves of fine bone lace

laying them out in pairs, like torn wings. *Pity*
the birds who will never know the moon's grace.

IX

Pity the foundlings in the wake of Arabella,
gathered at a rare fire, cupped hands begging the heat.

Pity their uplit cheekbones
like the death petals of a cursed buttercup.

Pity their fingers, swollen and stiff.
Pity their skins needled with poisons to trial medicines.

Pity their skinny legs on hiring day
stumbling, calf-like, around the ring.

Pity mouths prised open, gums bared to the world,
shirts raised up by strangers

who tapped a buyer's code on rib and chest.
Were they ready to work? Were they able?

Pity those workers returned by masters,
to the Hospital with a token note;

John Wheatley *covered in bruises*;
Mary Templeton *found selling her bones for bread*;

Rose Carter *would not say her Protestant prayers*;
Mary Dutchman *complained of being beaten too often*;

Frank Nelson *a very bad boy*;
Catherine Potter *not worth the price*.

X

Here, in the afterlight of the Foundling Hospital,
I kneel to the unmarked earth,

where infant corpses, ten at a time, were thrown down
into a dirt hole and sealed by a lime lid.

From the gate, the chaplain read the funeral.
The diligent hand maketh rich.

Somewhere inside darkness an owl coos,
as the Luas sings through Dublin's centre.

An iron song for the ones whose cradles were broken up and burned.
An iron song for the ones who survived.

It is written in the archives that Bridget Kearney came back,
a foundling price in her pocket, a demand on her lips.

Did her child appear more hollow than before?
Did her child reach out in recollection?

Back and forth, the Liffey rocks the cold grief
of our mothers,

the bare relief of Bridget who set out along the bog-road home,
the child's low breath at her collarbone.

Together again.
Together again.