

The Stone Speaks

I was one of the few still left in her collection when Arleen died, a full ninety years young. All her life she might suddenly stoop to examine a relic of the cold hard earth; to marvel at the play of color in a pebble, the delicate tracery of line on a stone, the appeal of smoothness or texture or shape of a rock. If it pleased her enough, she'd pocket it. Later, some would make their way into a little basket or pretty dish. Dressing in the morning, passing by during the day, she might stop long enough to finger one or another with a smile or a musing look.

She'd given most away in the last few years as the cancer loosened her hold on this world. Still, to the very end, she persisted in the wonder of every good thing in God's great earth—from those she loved most dearly to those she loved because everyone was worthy of love, she delighted in the lacy green and rich tones of living things; even lifeless stones occasioned wonder.

She had not picked me up from the ground because of my loveliness. Though that was her usual habit.

She chose me quite simply for where I came from, the rocky earth outside the church at Rothduff where a grandfather had donated a window; where her mother, the eldest of six, was christened and had worshipped until she left Ireland forever at 12.

And yet for all that, she did choose me and no other. She did keep me like a treasure, a relic of the vast history that coalesced to make her who she was.

As she held me that first time, testing the fit to her hand, she said to her daughters—who had brought her to her mother's birthplace for Arleen's 70th birthday—and the 70th anniversary of her mother's death—

"When I was a girl, there were still those who would hear the Irish in your name or your voice, and ask "So where were your people from then?" and if you said *Mayo*, they'd wince and say *Mayo! God help us!* They were thinking of the heart-breaking barrenness of the soil—one didn't even need blighted potatoes to be always on the edge of famine."

Arleen held me in her hand and looked with her daughters about the stony ground outside the church. They watched an old man in a donkey cart filled with peat clop by, the sight no different from what her mother would have been accustomed to.

One daughter took a photo and the other had a flash of memory of her grandmother's obituary, with its aside that Mary Grace Gannon McCarty's funeral was the first to have a motor hearse taking the body to the cemetery—though that came after saying the dearly departed had left behind a grieving husband and 9 children including two newborn premature twins, two brothers and three sisters, her mother as well as a host of relations and friends.

Later, Arleen reached into her pocket and fingered my limestoned surface as they walked about the old stone tower that a fanciful child could call a castle and the bourgheen path

that her mother and sisters and brothers had run down to reach the reedy shores and blue water of Lough Conn and the rise of Nephin Hill across in the distance. They peered about the old schoolhouse that now was a cottage and remembered a tale of an American relative, returning in the early 1960's, who said the woman who lived there had scooped some squawking chickens from the chair so the visitors could sit..

The storytelling daughter said the lake was named after Conn, a hunting dog belonging to the legendary Finn McCool. It was Conn's chasing after a huge boar that made the lake. Day after day the dog lead the hunt of the magical creature who kept well ahead, water pouring from his hooves; it was the pounding chase that beat the ground down into a basin and the water that filled it in. Some even say Conn drowned and the boar escaped. If so, surely Finn's tears added to the lake that the Gannon children would chase their way to, through the heavy overhanging branches of the bourgheen—a passage the children would tell their children and grandchildren was filled with mystery and promise, like no other place they had ever known.

Listening with half an ear, Arleen was thinking more about the landscape of her own childhood in western Iowa; the farms that the Gannon children had come to with their mother, to homestead, a good 90 years before this, Arleen's first visit to the land of her ancestors.

There was nothing here like the endless fertile rows of corn and wheat that stretched across the prairie. Still, how relentlessly flat that land was, broken at most by a narrow stream; the only trees were those close clustered around a farmhouse, a weak wall against the howl and wail of wind and winter snow and ice.

God help us, she thought. How her mother might have missed her girlhood in this corner of Mayo and all this soul-stirring eternal emerald green rising and falling in hills and dales and the soft lapping blue waves stirred by wind and the leap of the trout breaking the water's surface.

These days I lie in another shallow bowl jumbled with rocks, stones, pebbles collected according to the family habit, by a daughter, her own sons and granddaughters. It will happen that others may get exclaimed over, taken off, or displaced by a more immediately appealing specimen.

I remain, ready to hand—as I did to the last shudder of Arleen's breath, surrounded by those she loved most.

As for why that should be so—might it be precisely because I was not chosen for my loveliness?

Rather, abiding love and the need for a relic brought her to pick me out.

Though not particularly distinguished in appearance, the virtue I have is to provide a tangible link to a long lovely heritage touched with harshness. Stories can be written in stone to keep alive the memory of those now turned to dust—even those Arleen never had living memory of.

Most assuredly she had none of her mother Mary, the tall beauty of the Gannon girls everyone always said, with her dark auburn hair, blue eyes and easy warmth. Ah, the gift she had, they'd report, for *lilting*, that pure vocalization of old Gaelic tunes so there could be dancing when no one had money nor the gift of an instrument.

Arleen, the elder by minutes of the barely human looking twins, and her sister Eileen had been snatched away by one set of women while another group used bricks to tip the bed on a slant, with Mary's head down to staunch the bleeding which would not stop. So finally, the other children were shaken awake and bid to come in to kiss their Ma goodbye—even little Exey who got nothing for his 4th birthday the next day but the life-long wound that can come of being a motherless child.

Now Mary herself had the scantest of memories for her Da, John, who left Mayo when Mary was 6 and little Pat a newborn. He left with a promise to return with tickets in his fist to take them all off to grand new life, where no British overlord could claim so much of a man's hard labor that little was left for the babes—as if one could use cold stones for bread.

But all that came back was a black-rimmed envelope, delivered by hand to the family cottage by the postman's reluctant son, with villagers quietly trailing after so that there would be someone to sooth the frightened little ones and to comfort the wild keening wail of John's widow at the sight of it. She could not bear to open it so someone else must have unfolded the thick creamy paper, bought specially to bear the hard news; another read out how John had arrived at his sister's in Buffalo—had gone straight off the first day to seek work in the foundry. May God help us all, it was that very evening boys ran the block to his sister's house to report he was collapsed with a fatal heat stroke, on the cold stones under a bridge.

You might question if such stories can be seen in a stone. But Arleen once told a story about when the motherless twins were three, living with an older aunt; their father struggled to keep the rest of the brood going, working as a hired man on a farm several counties away. One day their Uncle Mike Flynn, who was married to their mother's youngest sister Nelly stopped to say he was off to visit his old home in Ireland. As he trotted the blond bright eyed little girls on his knee, he promised to bring back something special.

There already was a bit of the whiskey smell about him that the twins did not notice then—though later they could see how it had turned Nelly's heart to cold flint that made her much harder to love than he.

When he returned, the twins clamored for their treat and wondered if it were a dolly or coin or a bit of candy. "No, nothing so ordinary as that," he declared. Making a great show as he always did, he put his hand in his pocket and brought out his fist closed tight.

"Now, look," he whispered, "Look closely what I've got in my hand." His fingers uncurled as he said, "Aren't they only glorious--these little dancing fairy ponies, I brought back just for you!"

The Stone Speaks, a story by Mary Hynes-Berry, 2011

Arleen and Eileen saw them dancing that very minute and none other. They swore to it as old women and, in their mind's eye, even those who heard the story could see that those ponies were grand as ever grand could be.

All this is as it seems to me. Relics reflect the most ancient of impulses to whittle the past down to the barest remains--to those that give meaning to the present.

But I am only a lifeless stone, no mind, nor memory nor heart-beat has ever stirred me. The time since Arleen picked me up measures no more of my existence than a dust mote compares to the enormity of a granite crag. The eons of change that brought me to her hand, then pocket, then dish of final treasures were wrought without any sensation of pain on my part.

Yet stones are the relics of the universe—conceived in the primordial dust, infinitesimal bits of matter that coalesced into ancient mountain ranges. On the shores of Lough Conn, when Arleen chose the stone I had become, she held in her hand the colliding of ancient continents that later shuddered and separated; one bit gave birth to the slopes of Nephin looming above Lough Conn while another section drifted far off to become the Appalachian chain that was breached by the Ohio River that in turn poured into the Mississippi, the Father of Waters, on the banks of which Arleen's own ten children were born. At each millennium's long step of the way, bits broke off as great masses were pulverized by glaciers, ground into smaller and smaller particles by wind and water. Even a stone, most certainly one of my limestone nature, is eventually reduced back to dust.

From dust to glorious eternal dust is in the nature of stones--

As it is for Arleen.

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