

an casadh

Laura Ní fhlaibhín



with writings by
Beulah Ezeugo
Laura Fitzgerald
Emily Steer

an casadh

Laura Ní fhlaibhín

curatorial text

Katie O'Grady

writings

Laura Ní Fhlaibhín

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interviews

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Laura Ní Fhlaibhín's *an casadh* (the turn) unfolds as a bio-sculptural installation and live performance that explores kinship, ritual and nourishment, whilst also considering what it means to be implicated in conditions that are at once sustaining and precarious. Commissioned by The Glucksman in partnership with Cork Midsummer, and situated across the layered site of Elizabeth Fort, the work combines earthworms, sculptural cocoons and organic waste. 'Turning' here is multifarious: soil turning, bodies turning, histories turning over themselves. This publication sits within some twisted aspect of a turn, where writings by Ní Fhlaibhín, Beulah Ezeugo, Laura Fitzgerald and Emily Steer are assembled to interpolate themes of illness, care and ecological entanglement.

Across the time of *an casadh*, worms will live within interconnected ovoid structures, processing organic matter into vermicompost. In these cocoons the worms enact their chthonic labour out of sight, their presence only made audible by contact microphones which softly capture their wriggling, ingesting, reproducing, and excreting. Ní Fhlaibhín's sculptural language draws on the paradox of duality, with cast jesmonite, horse hair and worm humus surfaces topped with ambered glass lids which are containers of the moist, soft-bodies that live within. There is an otherworldly quality to the installation's arrival at the fort, evocative of science fiction and reminiscent of 'alien' forms in popular culture; H.R. Giger's xenomorph lifecycle, the sandworms of Dune, the parasitic infestations in Starship Troopers, and the sarlacc pit of Star Wars. The etymology of "alien" as "not one's own, of others, foreign" extends into its verb form in this display: to alienate, to estrange, to transfer or lose possession. In consideration of Elizabeth Fort's previous use as a women's convict depot, this echoes to the histories of displacement embedded in the site and also engages with illness, with bodies that no longer feel fully one's own.

Rooted in this installation is an attention to the more-than-human which resonates with María Puig de la Bellacasa's assertion that "the livelihoods and fates of so many kinds and entities on this planet are unavoidably entangled." de la Bellacasa proposes this as a "matter of care" which names the ways soil is not just a resource but a living, interconnected condition of existence, one in which

ecological processes are inseparable from social relations, economic systems, and the material requirements for survival. To care, in this instance, therefore extends from and beyond soil to a recognition of the interdependency of human and non-human lives. Drawing upon her experience of endometrial illness and resulting IVF treatments, Ní Fhlaibhín connects to soil (in)fertility and cycles that exceed human temporality suggesting that ecological thinking must also be intimate, and at times uncomfortable.

Within this publication, Ní Fhlaibhín's texts extend her thinking and feeling through reflection and poetry, including bilingual works that articulate a desire towards earthworms and their fluid bodies. The commissioned texts expand upon the project's interwoven concerns. Beulah Ezeugo's writing is a meditation on fields of care and kinship, thinking through persistence, labour, decay, and the strange intimacy between violence and survival. Laura Fitzgerald's text is rooted in her life in rural Kerry and reflects on a small act of ecological intervention and the overbearing pressures on agricultural communities in late-stage capitalism, capturing a tension between care and capacity alongside the guilt of not being able to do enough. Emily Steer's contribution turns to the psychoanalytic terrain of desire and disgust, informed by her experiences with IVF. In dialogue with the work's evocation of worms as reproductive bodies, her text probes the uneasy proximities between attraction and repulsion.

Together, these voices form a publication that remains with the complexity of attentiveness and entangled lives. If *an casadh* is a turning, it is not toward clarity but toward a deeper engagement with what it means to live and care within the shifting, squishy, and often alien terrains of our shared world.

ORATORYAL TEX





thoughts on eggs

Laura Ní Fhlaibhín



Five eggs/wormeries/orbs have landed, been birthed,
hurled into the redan at Elizabeth Fort.

I think about eggs a lot-my grandad was from Aughrim,
a townland near Ballinasloe, and he believed in the malevolent
and benevolent properties of hens eggs; a spiteful neighbour
could make mischief by depositing some eggs in your field,
all manner of curses could be inferred from the egg. Aughrim
was the site of the bloodiest battle in Ireland, and my Grandad
and his siblings avoided particular fields on dark nights, they
walked home the long way round to avoid the ghosts.

Ghost eggs too.

In very recent years I completed three unsuccessful rounds of
IVF, and the quality, quantity, shape and size of my eggs were
a constant source of awkward conversations with consultants,
nurses, healthcare staff. My shitty eggs. Fucked by years and years
of endometrial growth and clusters and lesions and swellings. Mike
and I filed/prescriptions/purchased/stored/refrigerated/ measured/
pumped/ injected all manners of hormones and substances into my
stomach or thigh to *make more eggs*.

Elizabeth fort has had many lives, most of them violent. Layers and
layers of cruelty. The violence of incarcerating women in the fort,
sentenced to exile as 'penal transportation' to Australia or Tasmania
stays with me. The cruelties of an 18th century colonial judicial
system, where a young woman, such as Mary Cassidy, could be
sentenced to exile, forced transplantation, for stealing a handkerchief,
lingers. The institutional and systemic incarceration of women
has always scared me. Maybe it stems from being an 'illegitimate'
child born in 1980; my mam was a single parent, and mother and
baby homes were still in operation all over the island until 1998.

Elizabeth Fort was originally built from timber and earth in the
16th century- I enjoy visualising Corkonians scurrying
around the fort, nimbly dismantling it, muddying pile by
muddying pile. Mud under their fingernails. Resistance.
Only for the fort to be reconstructed a few years later.



Ghosts with mud under their fingernails.

The five eggs are sitting/balancing/slumping/lolling/ in the redan of the fort. They are made from jesmonite and stained with charcoal and worm shit and strengthened with hessian and horse hair strands. Scaled-up hens eggs that are connected to pipes and topped with glass. They have air holes and drainage holes for earthworms. The eggs host earthworms; they are wriggling and breathing and living and shitting and secreting and having sex and sleeping here. They are pumping out microbial shit through their moist wet anuses, I am imagining them in a sexy rhythm, like the nematodes that Katie and I saw dancing on the microscope screen at Dr Israel's laboratory. My endometriosis is deep in my rectum too. I fixate on the Google AI overview of the earthworm's digestive tract, 'complete, straight, tube-like alimentary canal running from mouth to anus. My fixation with their wet wet rectums pushing and squeezing and holding and dancing makes me wet.

The five eggs are plugged/suctioned/tethered into a network of soil-pipes, one third full of organic matter, with air holes and drainage holes too. Pipe highways for earthworms to travel, migrate, wriggle, secrete. The pipe network has acoustic leads and devices, all that inhabit the soil will be audible. Open pipes, tubes, networks to eggs; thinking of my hydrosalpinx as a flood barrier/border control/break/impasses to my ovaries. And thinking of cul-de-sac tubes that go nowhere.

At the back, near the top most enclave of the fort, a white hospital sheet will hang, digitally embroidered with some of these words and others. It will have been used to make a tea, the sheet repurposed to hold worm shit tight and soak through water. There will be stains, from the brew. The stains will look like stars and suns to me.

Shit star, shit sun.

I will gather the worm shit bits from the sheet into balls, and accumulate into a pyramid. A brass monkey re-jig, swapping out cannons for worm shit balls. For the fort ghosts to grab



and hurl and pound this ground. Ghosts with shit under their fingernails.

Shit balls.

This evening as I write, five of the eggs have been birthed, in a workshop in Bermondsey, a three week cycle, I have smeared each mold with rich delicious earthworm shit, fresh from our wormery. Cycles of time, ivf cycles and injection schedules, and us sitting on the toilet finding thigh fat for shooting up with all manners of hormones to fatten eggs. Patient kind Mike methodically sucking up the substance with the correct syringe, two years ago and more. Those difficult orbits.

I am sitting with the irony of time, years have passed but now I make eggs (art) that are smeared with shit and that is joy.
A miracle cycle.

These eggs are swollen and fat and will host.

Host ghosts.

Shit sun shit star shit egg.

Photogrammetry scans by Ariel Caine.



house martin

Laura Fitzgerald

You have no idea about people,

I had a run in with one of the neighbours but I'm ok.

and what they can do,

But I would like to make a statement. My name is
Laura Fitzgerald, and I live in Inch, County Kerry,
between the mountain and the sea.

or what kind of man he is,

I am involved in a dispute over land with my neighbour.

No idea.
You have no idea,

On the morning of the 11th of July, I return
from town, having earlier undertaken food
shopping in Tralee.

about the bad old days,

In the distance I see two figures in the back yard
area of our home.

or the power of the Church,

As I walk towards the back door.

or what my grandfather went through,

I feel aggressive swooping sounds close to my head,
chest and legs.

no idea.
You have no idea,

As I pass through the door, I hear unnerving,
twittering sounds overhead.



the effect bird shit has on freshly painted walls.

I set my shopping bags down on the kitchen floor,

or about the Department,

And go back outside to look in the yard
to discover that there is shit all over my
freshly painted house.

And what they can make you do,

I further note that the construction of a dwelling can
be observed overhead. One that has commenced without
my permission, on the back gable of our home.

no idea.

I sleep badly that night and, in the morning, I awake
to angry chattering outside our bedroom window.

You have no idea,

I feel intimidated in my own home and that I am
constantly being surveilled. Eyes in the sky, watching
our comings and goings, our every move.

about the kind of things that he would do,

The defendant claims that he and his relatives have
been in joint occupation of the property, for the
past fifteen years and therefore have an easement,
or a Right-of-Way, over my property to construct
said dwelling, and that I (the Claimant), have caused
criminal damage and destroyed his dwelling on
4th July of this year. He then quoted the Wildlife
Act of 1976 Section 3-part A.

or what kind of man he is,

The defendant states that he is exempt from the Planning Laws of 2000, under the above act and does not need to apply for permission through the local authorities.

no clue at all,

I am counter claiming that on the 4th of July, although I did attempt to knock off his family home with a telescopic window cleaning pole, I also did observe that it was vacant at the time.

of the kind of madness that goes on around here.

He is claiming that although his first family had vacated the property, intervening personal matters had delayed the commencement of his second family. The matter is before the courts and a hearing is due to begin in June of next year.

We'll see what happens. We'll see what happens.

Our back yard is like an airport.



Then what?

"The nest fell while you were in town. The whole thing collapsed, it was like an earthquake or a landslide."

I rove the earth with my fingers, recovering their remains.

I find three, then I find another. A small grey ball of fluff, in-between the broken heads of Nasturtium flowers. The victim toll rises to four. I ask them if they want to press charges, but they do not respond. Maybe I should I thought. There are nest and plant parts all over the back yard. Criminal damages.

I pick the fluff balls up, ever so carefully. Tiny vandals. They look so fragile. I make them a new nest out of a flowerpot, wrapped in an old woolen jumper, stuffed inside a Decathlon bag. 'Up high', she says on the phone. The best I can do is the bedroom window. They are quiet that night. Some chirps, but public order is restored.

No sign of the parents. It's an offence for any human who has the custody, charge or care of a child to willfully assault, ill-treat, neglect, abandon or expose the child, or indeed to cause or procure or allow them to be assaulted, ill-treated, neglected, abandoned or exposed, in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to the kid. End of. I get up the following day and look up to the apex of the roof. The parents are there, busily constructing a new house ten feet above the window oblivious to the survivor's plight. At night the chirps from the baby birds are silent. I imagine seeing a tiny planning notice: Renovations. I phone another helpline. 'No way', says the man on the other end. 'Once they hit the ground the parents won't go near them.

'Try feeding them cat food.' I look guiltily at our cat. He suspects something. I gingerly open the window, the Decathlon bag is still on the sill, anchored by the pull cord to the inside handle of our bedroom window. The little birds are still inside the man-made nest. I soak cat kibble overnight in water. It stinks.

In the morning one victim has gone from being sluggish to still. Its fluffy chest is motionless. I push its tiny body out of the makeshift nest I've made with my fingers. I will give it a Viking funeral in the reposessed field next to the Church. Its head pointing to the sky.

I tuck in his wings smooth to his body and pat the little head. I trudge back through the field which is now rumored to be

owned by solicitors in Limerick. Some of it is already turning into native forest. It will all be cleared once the building starts. I feel heavy with sadness. A drone buzzes past me overhead seeing everything.



Back in the house, I cautiously pick up pieces of the wet kibble with a set of tweezers, offering it up to the birds' tiny beaks. No response. I try again. Suddenly small black shards open into yellow pop-up tents. 'Jesus!', I jump. I am astonished to see they have tongues. Small black eyes look back at me defiantly. They might still be after me for criminal damages.

In goes the cat food. It's hard to know who is who, inside the nest. I can't reach in easily to their little heads. They are demanding free legal aid and the right to food, which the latter I tell them, doesn't exist, under Irish law. My partner is away. I take the nest inside from the windowsill. Transfer of deeds. They can live in his studio. I siphon them off into a cleaner nest, an IKEA bowl, taking tips from YouTube. I'm worried about double feeding some and starving others. About creating a potential case for neglect. But the yellow mouths insistently continue to open. It's tricky, some beaks are opening wider and wider. Others start to slow down. I push the piece of wet cat food to the side of one of their mouths. But it feels like a closed door. The small black eyes of this one seem duller.

My partner comes home, shopping bags in his hands, I swoop to help him, packing items into the fridge and presses. In his absence, he realises his studio has been taken. Adverse possession. I shrug defensively. 'Transfer of custody.' He feeds them like a surgeon. A steady hand with determination. An expert with Google: 'They're dehydrated!' he says triumphantly. He takes cotton buds from a box and soaks their little beaks with large drops of water. I see them gulp, mad for the drink. We watch them.

One no bigger than my thumb reverses his fluffy behind and neatly poops outside the perimeter of the fake nest. We marvel at the size of the glob-like defecation, covered in a skin, which (the internet tells me) is like a small sack that the parent bird can pick up with its beak and whip out of the nest.

‘What about Saturday?’ I say to him. ‘I don’t think we can go anywhere anymore.’ Our cat is clawing at the door. ‘We have responsibilities.’ I begin to fear the worst: a summer of cancelled plans; wedding and birthday invitations unanswered. I start to imagine the cat finding a way into the studio, massacring the birds. They are lying dead, heads hanging at wrong angles on the floor.

He looks at me in disbelief. ‘We can’t...’ he says shrugging, tweezers poised in mid-air, ‘just stop everything’. I look over his shoulder to the cluster of small mouths, demanding more from the blue IKEA bowl they’re nestled within. Parental leave is out of the question. I phone back the number. ‘I can take them in three days’, she says. She has sworn not to take any animals, while she is volunteering on a dig and caring for a swift at the same.

‘My partner is doing the dig too!’ I exclaim. She brings the swift with her, she explains, feeding it every two hours. I mentally count in my head. ‘Ok’, I say, taking a deep inhale. ‘Three days is great’. ‘They need worms’, says The expert, ‘they won’t grow on cat food’.

During the long, monotonous work meeting, I switch off my camera. They are talking about a new environmental policy. I slip away from my desk in the kitchen and go into the studio. Three small balls chirp into life, and I give each of them a few pieces of their gloopy food. The nearly dead one – Ricky Martin – has been rehydrated. He opens his yellow mouth wide, the little tongue out. My partner has saved him. The sadness lifts. I am excited.

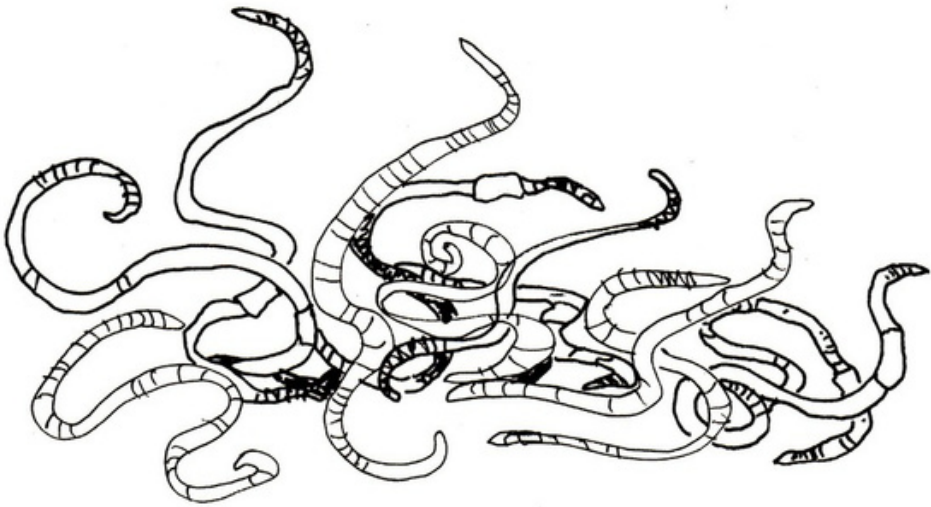
I go to the sea to clear my head. I drive slowly. Birds are swooping overhead, catching flies. My partner has taken over the feeding schedule for the afternoon. I see a text. ‘Bring them tomorrow?’ It’s her last day on the dig.

Dad has a trick; he looks at the clouds, then the ground.
Rain is close. We pull aside fertilizer bags, buckets and stones.
Underneath there is life, woodlice, centipedes, worms.
They have come up to meet the rain. He is disgusted
at my shrieks.

The worms wriggle so hard. I don't remember them
being so ALIVE. The ground does not want to relinquish
them. I dig hard with my fork trying to loosen the soil.
Their bodies writhe as I pull them from the earth.

My partner cuts the worms decisively. They multiply into small
wriggling pieces, as we tweeze them into the open mouths.

'What's for dinner?' he asks me, as I slide plates of Chicken Kiev
onto the table. We look at them doubtfully, our favorite meal
bleeding out with garlic butter and slowly going cold on the plate.
In the morning my niece comes to say goodbye. She cannot speak
yet. I take her in my arms while my sister looks at the birds with
delight. Suddenly it seems like my niece might be easier to care for.



I left a box of eggs
at your door.

We ready ourselves, cleaning up more poop, feeding the rest of the worms into the little bellies. During our own breakfast we push pieces of scrambled egg around. There is a hardboiled egg that has been sitting in the fridge since yesterday.



Xx

‘Will they come to you or to us?’ I say to the woman. The swift is resting on her chest like a regal broach. Its noble head is full of the sky.

Fairweather friends.

‘They will come back to you’, she says, and I imagine my partner like Snow White. Little tweety birds flying around his head, attempting to roost in his studio next year amongst the speaker equipment and nests of wires.

The blind leading the blind.

She confidently breaks the heads off a wax worm and uses her hand to pop small pieces of it into their beaks. Then she uses her fingers to pick up each of their globular poop sacks, expertly flicking them away. I can nearly feel their black eyes look back at her in adoration. ‘We are getting an upgrade,’ they must be thinking.

Money speaks many languages.

Back home, the studio is quiet. The incessant chirping has stopped. The silence is vacuous. The house feels too big for us. It doesn’t smell of cat food anymore. The fermented, malty smell we had become accustomed to is gone. Our cat deposits a headless gift at the back door in appreciation.

Man or a mouse.

The birds' parents have a new nest half built on the apex of the house. We had thought we would power hose the shit-laden back wall in October, once the birds had gone, and that we would knock down the nest while we were at it. Now everything is uncertain. Up in the air.

When the brown stuff hits the fan.

They find a body, a human one, on the final day of the dig. It might be thousands of years old. My partner runs over a cat on the way home. He slows down in shock. The cat's owner is standing by the side of the road and raises both of his hands in the air, two middle fingers projecting squarely in the car's rearview mirror.

Say nothing.

I pass along the road to the hospital for my appointment. An egg hunt. I am trying to find out how many I still have.

Don't forget to count.

Trying to avoid moths, and birds, cats, cyclists, small children, pensioners, and tourists who might normally drive on the other side of the road. The season is ending.

We love to see them,

At home, from the gable end of the house next door,
small pilots are taking off.

but we love to see them go.

The way things are going, they will be travelling more than we will. I imagine my own eggs somewhere in my belly, in order of freshness, storied in newspaper lined paint tins, like in Granny's larder. Some of them might be going off.



Winding up the elastic band,

My partner phones me. New nest down, outside my
sisters' house. My four-year old nephew looks on in horror.
'Did I do that?', he asks. He had just called my partner
a weasel. He thought it was his fault. 'All of this rain',
says my sister. 'The air is so moist. The nests can't dry
properly in the sun.' Or the paint is too smooth
for the nests to stick

the wheels have left the runway.

We lie in bed at night, fretful. Guilty as charged.
We painted our houses last year. Perhaps the nests cannot
hold the weight of the little birds, and the incessant rain.

Onwards and upwards.

'Address? Age? Occupation?' They ask me in the hospital. I feel
foolish. "Forty-year-old artist from Kerry", I say, but only in my head.
I am waiting for someone to yell at me to leave. I write down
'Dublin-based-thirty-something-florist,' – same as my car insurance.

For the birds,

I get up in the morning and go outside the back of our house; I see the grey shape on the wall behind the fallen nest. I remember now that we painted carefully around the nest. I go out to find more worms.

hunger is a great sauce.

Some earth is heaped where my father and his brother-in-law shouted the heads off each other last week. I find it ironic that my uncle-in-law's name is Crow. They are still rowing over the septic tank.

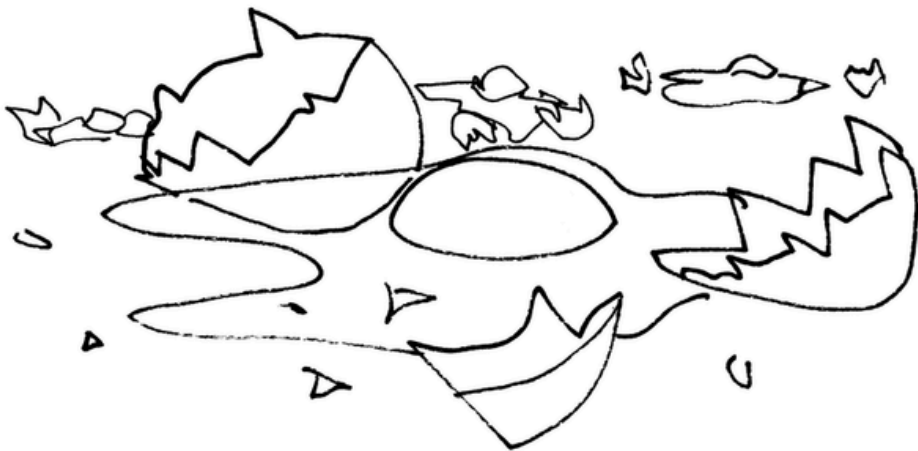
A friendly chat.

While pushing the earth mound with my wellie, my leg buckles, that muscle pops out again. In pain, I curse the damp air, the worms, my joints. I hobble back towards the house. The birds will have to stick with the kibble.

Did you hear about your man in Listowel?

I phone the animal expert again.
'I've no children' I tell her.

He drove a JCB straight through the house.



fieldwork
Beulah Ezeugo

Worm

A landscape or ecological system is always rendered through processes of abstraction: on a small hill within Elizabeth fort, scoops of compost are encased within a series of egg-shaped sculptures which function as a wormery. Hundreds of living earthworms are visible through a pane of dark glass. The effect is similar to viewing a newborn child; fresh from the chthonic realm, naked, hyper-visible, and inexplicably in the middle of things.

Worms were among the earliest organisms to move out of the ocean and to make their home on land. They still retain a kind of primordial fluidity, moving around each other in choreographed loops. The vermiculturist tells onlookers that worms can live to be three years old but as with all animals, most will die in their first year. We, the human onlookers, nod solemnly, forgetting that we are no different to all animals. The worms die as many of us might; alone, prematurely, once and for all.

Horse

Walking along the edges of a field in the late afternoon, sunlight splits across the stones of a crumbling wall. A faraway figure stands with one hand on her hip, touching up the paint on a white windowpane. Where a lone horse grazes, a pool of light gathers in the muscular curve between its hip and its back.

A woman is often treated as a landscape; that is to say that she too, can be made up through acts of imagination. Ideas of what constitutes womanhood first took shape in the minds of men who wanted horses on whose backs they could ride, and girls on whose shoulders a large portion of their burdens could rest. History makes it so that people remember the men and forget both the women and the horses – although it was their mouths, their labour, their fortitudinousness that pulled the world behind them.

In 2005, the Scottish singer-songwriter KT Tunstall released *Suddenly I See*, a song inspired by the photograph of Patti Smith on the cover of her 1975 debut album, *Horses*. Theorist, Camille Paglia aptly described the image taken by Robert Mapplethorpe

as “devastatingly original.” In the photograph, Smith is shrouded in natural light. She stands against a white wall wearing a white button-up shirt, a thin black ribbon tied at the collar. A small horse pin is fastened to a black jacket slung over her shoulder. The album supposedly took its name from the pin, but Smith - who in the image is self-possessed and markedly androgynous - looks unmistakably equine. The affinity with the horse comes through in everything: from her mane of dark hair, to the severe elegance of her posture. Her body is angled in a way that sharpens the line of her hipbone. Her chin is thrust forward like an alert animal.

After seeing the photograph of Smith, Tunstall wrote her song in 30 minutes, including the lyrics: “And everything around her is a silver pool of light... And she’s taller than most / And she’s looking at me... She got the power to be, the power to give ... Suddenly I see / This is what I wanna be.” What Tunstall may not have fully understood is that the erotic pull was not toward the woman in the image, but toward the creature she embodied. Tunstall proclaims that she wants to be Patti Smith. I believe that what she truly wants is to be a horse.

Fuel

The built environment is also an ethnographic subject. This is most obvious in any metropolitan city, whose erotic allure, theorist Iris Marion Young believes, comes directly from the aesthetics of its material build, specifically, its vivid lights and the grandeur of its buildings. In reference to the machinations of capitalism, Theodor W. Adorno tells us that where the light is brightest, is where the fecal secretly rules. Our modes of extracting natural resources entail a procedural, banal form of violence, like when a hook enters the cheek of a fish. For every ornate stone building there is a carved absence: in a quarry somewhere, a building-shaped hollow descends into the earth. Off the coast of Mayo, a large offshore pipeline draws gas from the Corrib field to power the city’s infrastructure. Somewhere on the M1, a thin spill of oil glows with a celestial sheen and a forgotten world opens across the concrete.

Gorse

I once knew a woman who would address plants directly. “You meet each entity in its own language”, she said. Standing over a scrub of gorse and pointing with her finger at the patterns of sunlight that moved across it. What she meant by all of this posturing is that it’s possible all matter is sentient, and that solidarity across species is something collectively borne. With unbearable sincerity, she leans into the plant “What is your other name? How are you addressed by the nesting birds, animals who seek refuge beneath you?”

Gorse is considered an invasive weed, though ‘weed’ says nothing about the plant’s value, it says everything about the context of the encounter. The farmers who come to clear the land will indiscriminately set the shrubs alight. The gorse and the hoglets with their tender white underbellies who rest within it, will go up in flames. Ironically the plant is stimulated by fire. Intense heat coaxes life from its rootstock, causing it to resprout with a kind of defiant abundance. So, the gorse speaks back and the message it sends is this: in the shadow of all of this loss life still persists.



WORMS

Names and types (*piast*, *cnuimh*, *caideán*) ; uses (in earth, as fishing-bait, for divination) ; oil from buried worms as hair-grower ; worm as cure for burn ; seventh son shows power over worm (*cneasú péiste*) ; worm-knot as talisman (*snaidhm na péist*) ; worms in people and animals ; worms as weather-augers. Wire-worm (*caochruadh*). Legendary worms of great size (*piastaí*, *olla-phéist*) ; worms petrified by saints.

From A Handbook of Irish Folklore (1942) |
by Seán Ó Súilleabháin.

the worm will turn
Emily Steer

Disgust and desire are uneasy bedfellows. We desperately try to separate their union, but they meet and merge in the unconscious regardless. In Laura Ní Fhlaibhín's *an casadh* (the turn) – a hearty installation that writhes with worms as they eat, defecate and copulate – repulsion and attraction are playfully united. The piece calls to mind the work of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, who wrote about the paranoid-schizoid urge to keep good and bad separated in order to protect an idealised internal or external object. Maturity of the psyche is represented by the ability to withstand two apparently contradictory aspects mingling, though in many cultures we are encouraged to keep them neatly apart.

an casadh (the turn) may evoke intense disgust in the viewer, leading us to the primal urges within our own psyches that we repress in order to keep ourselves separated from our animal, earthly nature. The installation revels in discomfort, finding parallels with the artist's mind, body and soul which has withstood the at times torturous world of infertility and IVF. Ní Fhlaibhín delves into the gloopy tropes of body horror, reflecting our deepest fears and fascinations with the physical form. The tunnels in *an casadh* are gut-like, drawing the mind to the twisting tubes of the bowels and digestive system. These tunnels conjure Ní Fhlaibhín's experience of endometriosis, which consumes reproductive and digestive systems. The artist admires and longs for their experience of one long smooth bowel, untroubled by blockages and endometrial lacerations. The piece also stirs broader anxieties of permeability. The worm plays a crucial role in keeping the outside world thriving, but it can demolish the inner world. Tapeworms and digestive worms are a physical symbol of bodily destruction, unwanted invaders that quite literally consume our insides.

Worms show us how to hold contradictions together. Devoid of eyes, ears and noses, their entire bodies are pleasure centres. They feel and taste through every millimetre of their surface, like disembodied tongues wriggling in the dirt as they churn it over. They maintain the health of the natural world, aerating the soil and boosting fertility for prime plant growth. Worms are undeniably phallic. Unlike snakes, who are more overtly virile in their bodily connotations, worms are icons

of softness and flexibility, worshiping the mother earth that holds them. We should adore them. But they also trigger our fears and phobias; reminding us of the masses of maggots that overtake rotting food and our inevitable physical demise in the dirt.

The worm is woven through Irish language and folklore as a multifaceted creature, with magical and monstrous properties. In one folkloric tradition, the seventh son of the seventh son – able to see the future and cure physical ailments – could be distinguished by placing a worm into their left hand. When the worm shrivels and dies, they are a legitimate healer. An Irish word for worm, ‘péist’, derives from the Latin ‘bestia’, which means beast or monster. It can be used to refer to the common earthworm, as well as a huge, mythical, dragon-like aquatic creature. In *an casadh*, Ní Fhlaibhín embraces the healing possibilities of the worm. As they turn over the compost, they generate a sumptuous fertilizer, highlighting their important role as part of a local ecosystem.

IVF itself represents an uncomfortable meeting between elements we might rather keep apart, as the sexual and medical, romantic and clinical sit side by side. Such contradictions run throughout the experience of motherhood in much of the contemporary world. Motherhood is idealised and purified in some forms and demonised in others. Cultures obsessed with fertility that frame themselves as family first also look down on IVF as an unnatural way of creating a family, and likewise punish women for seeking bodily autonomy. We are told how and when we can reproduce, expected to live up to an unrealistic “good object” in the form of the young, fertile yet innocent maiden.

Growing up with a single mother in the 1980s, Ní Fhlaibhín understands this hypocritical moral rupture all too well. Elizabeth Fort, which houses *an casadh*, is a symbol of violent splitting between the “good” and “bad” women of Ireland’s past, a place of incarceration for those who lived outside the strict moral codes of their time. It is full of the ghosts of those who were cut off from their societies, taking the projections of

everyone else's inner rot so as to keep the condemned badness out. Ní Fhlaibhín's work rejects such easy separations, basking, like a worm in the dirt, in the human mess of pain, joy, disgust and fascination.



Notes on Interviews

The following pages contain transcripts from interviews conducted with Dr. Fidelma Butler and Dr. Israel Ikoyi of University College Cork's School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, across a series of project development days with Laura Ní Fhlaibhín and curator Katie O'Grady.

Dr. Butler and Dr. Ikoyi's research has been instrumental to the development of this project, alongside their advice, support, and thoughtful consideration of the ethical practices involved in working with earthworms. Their interviews are included here as indications of the vast areas of research currently underway, with real implications for the systems that shape our world and the possibilities for future co-existence.

*an interview with
Dr. Fidelma Butler*

Katie

So Fidelma, would you mind maybe just giving a short introduction to yourself and some of the work that you do?

Fidelma

My name is Fidelma Butler and I am an ecologist. I work here at the School of Bees, which is the School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences. Because I'm an ecologist, I work on the interaction of lots of different things. I'm very interested in solving problems, so I work on a wide range of organisms like hares and bats, butterflies, ladybirds, deer, all sorts of animals really, but all around solving a problem.

Katie

Can you describe the foamy mass that earthworms create to make the mucus for cocoons?

Fidelma

Most animals try to achieve two things in their life: one of them is to stay alive and the other is to leave offspring, to reproduce. And so different organisms invest different amounts of energy into how they increase the chance of their young surviving. And for earthworms, they lay their eggs into these protective cocoons. When earthworms mate, they have male and female sexual parts, but they don't fertilize their own eggs. They mate with another individual and they pass the sperm from one individual to another.

So they come together in a close union and as they do, as the sperm is passed out and the eggs are passed out onto the surface of the body, they secrete this foamy mass from a special area of their body called the clitellum. The eggs and the sperm are then passed into this foamy mass which then starts to harden. And as it does, they wriggle and twist, and they slip this mass down towards their head, along the length of their body until it slips right off the body. It hardens and contracts, and the outer edge of it dries up until it forms this little cocoon. And inside in that little

cocoon are the fertilized eggs. And the eggs then develop inside this little cocoon, maybe 12 to 15 eggs in each. They are protected in there until they emerge.

Katie

You categorize earthworms as a keystone species. Can you explain this a little?

Fidelma

So, a keystone species means a species that performs such a function in the ecosystem that without that species, the ecosystem would suffer very severe, damaging effects. Earthworms are a great example of this. They burrow through the soil, making these pathways and pipes, like a drainage system right through the soil. So that means that water and air can enter the soil right down deep - without that air and water, other organisms, don't survive. So, all those kinds of bacteria and fungi and microarthropods, all the little things that live in the soil, would suffer without air and water. They call it bio-turbation - that disturbing of the soil. It has a very positive effect.

And they also bring all this organic matter down from the top of the soil. Every year, every autumn, you see all the leaves that fall from the trees. But by springtime, all those leaves are gone. And they're gone primarily because earthworms take them and bring them down into the soil. So, without earthworms, the cycling of nutrients and the removal of what we consider to be waste would be, quite impossible. So that's why they're called keystone species.

Katie

Could you speak about how earthworms gain auditory information from the soil?

Fidelma

There has been quite a bit of controversy about whether earthworms can actually hear. They can pick up cues from

vibrations in the soil as they pass across the body's surface, and they can gain a certain amount of information from that. But you know Charles Darwin did an awful lot of work on earthworms. And one of the things he tried to investigate was if earthworms could hear. So, he got his son to play the bassoon close to earthworms, and he saw that they didn't recoil or react to the sound. He concluded that no, they couldn't hear.

In the last number of years there has been kind of renewed interest in whether earthworms can hear sound waves through the air. Because really, true hearing has been proved to be very rare in many other groups of animals, right? And especially in invertebrates. Right now, there is a lot of work has been done in the University of Warwick, where they have demonstrated that earthworms react to sound through the air. But I guess the controversy now is about how they pick up and process that sound. So, there is still a bit of still a bit of work done there. But yes, they do.

Katie

You mentioned that earthworms carry some of the ocean in their body. So maybe could you speak a little bit more on this?

Fidelma

Earthworms belong to a group called the annelida, which comes from the Latin word annula or annulatus, which means ringed. When you look at an earthworm, you see all the segments (rings), all the lines, stamps, body. Each of those is a separate segment, separated by a membrane. And inside in each segment, there is a liquid called coelomic fluid. And this is a mixture of water and salts and other various kinds of biochemicals. So they are, in a sense, carrying a fluid that is quite like the ocean inside in their body.

When you see an earthworm move, they can move in all sorts of directions - sideways, transversely, up and down. They're invertebrates, but they have this coelomic fluid in each

segment. They have two sets of muscles, circular muscles that squeeze inwards, and longitudinal muscles that pull from the front and the back of the body. So, when they squeeze those muscles, they can change the shape of each segment, and they put the segment under pressure, extending them. And by the alternative movement of the longitudinal and circular muscles, they can either squeeze or elongate the segments, and that means it pushes, it can push segments and pull segments together, and that's how they move.

It's called a hydrostatic skeleton. They don't have a stiff skeleton like we do- but they can stiffen parts of their body by putting this liquid under pressure in each segment and use it like a skeleton. A lot of animals, take various measures to maintain their moisture, to maintain the water in their body, because we all came from the ocean and one of the major challenges in coming out of the ocean was dehydration, drying up out in this dry atmosphere that we live in. But earthworms have gone a step further and they maintain part of part of the ocean still within them.

Katie

Could you speak about earthworms' ideal habitat, how this might be preserved and what can damage it?

Fidelma

They like soil in which they can burrow. So, one of the things that is important to them is moisture. They like humid areas. You don't get them in very dry soils, and you don't get them in soils that have been hardened and that are very compacted. They're not too fussy apart from that and you'll find different species in different types of soils, but they like a loose, humid, damp soil with some organic matter in it because that's what they feed on.

So, the damaging factors, for earthworms are things like desiccation - drying out of their habitat, but also compaction - squeezing the soil so that all the air spaces are gone from it.

And you see compaction quite often with huge machinery, large heavy vehicles moving back and forth over soil that causes the grains of soil, let's say, to be pushed closer together and all the air to be squeezed out of it. So, soil loses its structure and becomes totally unsuitable then for earthworms.

Katie

And if it becomes unsuitable for earthworms, it loses its fertility for growing anything?

Fidelma

Absolutely. That's exactly what happens. The soil loses its fertility, and fertility is then supplied in inorganic form. So that's why we use a lot of inorganic, artificial fertilizers. If you look at soil that has been cultivated year after year without a break and lots of heavy machinery is driving back and forth over it as they have to do, you'll see that it's very pale in colour and it's pale because the organic matter has been used up. If you have a garden at home and you dig through your soil and it's nice and loose and dark, that's good organic rich soil. But if you looked at a field that has been cultivated year after year for arable crops, wheat or for oats say, you'd see that the soil is dry, pale in colour and quite hard.

Katie

Can you talk to us about vermicomposting and the sort of fertilizer produced by the worms through that process, the worm tea?

Fidelma

So in a composter, you're providing the organic matter that is very high in nutrients - but to us, we consider it to be waste, right? We're throwing it out. It's our food waste. But actually, it's still full of nutrients. So, you put it into your wormery and the worms then break it down and work on it, producing that fertilizing liquid. But it still is hugely high in nutrients and probably too high for lots of plants. So it has to be diluted, and this is the worm tea- it's like a liquid compost.

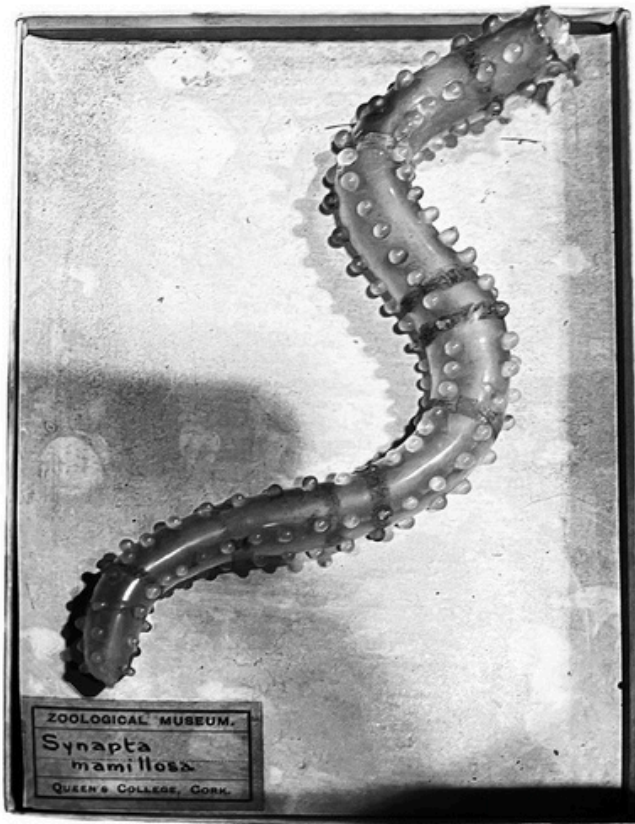
Katie

How important are earthworms
in environmental management?

Fidelma

So in lots of areas that have become degraded and are now being remediated, the provision of earthworms will be a big factor in bringing the soil back into good condition - to have those channels and pores to bring all of that air and water through it, not just sitting on it or running off the top. Earthworms are an amazing group of organisms. And you know, most people, when you mention worms, will kind of involuntarily wrinkle their nose and immediately have that sort of aversive reaction, but crikey, without earthworms, this world would be a very different place.

*Dr. Fidelma Butler is a lecturer in Ecology and Mammals
at the University College Cork School of Biological Earth
and Environmental Sciences*



Blaschka glass model worm, UCC School of
Biological Earth and Environmental Sciences

*an interview with
Dr. Israel Ikoyi*

Katie

Dr. Israel Ikoyi, could you share with us who you are and a bit about your work?

Israel

My name is Israel Ikoyi. I'm a lecturer in Environmental Science at the School of BEES in UCC. My research is focused on sustainable agriculture- how we can produce food in a more sustainable way with a strong focus on soil and the organisms that live in soils.

Katie

Could you briefly explain what nematodes are, what they do, and where we might find them?

Israel

Nematodes are microscopic worms. But there are some nematodes that are parasites of humans and animals that are big enough for the naked eye to see. They range in size from large ones that are parasites to humans and animals to the tiny little ones that live in soil. They are found everywhere.

In the soil, we have different categories of nematodes. There are those that are living freely in the soil, and they are eating bacteria and fungi. In that case, they are contributing to the cycling of nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus for plants, because they're taking more than they require, and they excrete the excess into the soil solution where plants can take that up and plants can grow better. There is also a group that are parasites of plants, and these are the ones that cause economic loss and damage. Some of them are very specific to the host plant that they attack and managing them is a major issue.

There is a famous quote by one of the fathers of nematology, which is the study of nematodes, Nathan Cobb, an American scientist. He said, if everything in the world is removed, we can picture where every tree, every human and every plant are supposed to be by knowing the nematodes that are

associated with them. So that emphasizes the point that they are everywhere, in every environment - soil, water, plants, humans and animals.

Katie

In what way do nematodes affect environmental management, whether that be positive or negative?

Israel

Some of these nematodes are used as biological indicators of the health of the soil or the health of the environment. For example, some of them are very sensitive to disturbance like tillage or compaction, or even chemicals like chemical fertilizer or pesticides that can affect them. If you can find these sensitive species in an environment, you can say the soil is healthy.

Parasitic nematodes, which we will call in the technical jargon entomopathogenic nematodes, are useful in controlling things like insects like the leather jackets in grass fields or some insects that cause patches in golf courses, because as a biological control, they are more preferred to a chemical control, i.e. spraying insecticides to control those insects. So, they are very, very vital as biological indicators of the environment.

If there is a pollution event as well, say, if there is an oil spill or war, you can go to sample the environment, either the water or the soil, the nematodes you see will tell you whether the environment has just been recently disturbed, is recovering, or is in a stable state.

Katie

In our first meeting, you described the reproductive life of nematodes vividly - thank you very much. In my notes, I jotted down Male nematodes are useless in terms of reproduction. Could you expand on this?



Nematoid cysts, Dr. Israel Ikoyi and Laura Hurley

Israel

So in some plant parasitic species, the males are not involved in the reproduction, and it is the reproduction that increases the damage that they can cause to crops. The female can reproduce on its own. And one of the control strategies we can implement is making sure that the juveniles develop into more males than females, breaking the disease cycle.

Katie

How do the females reproduce on their own?

Israel

We call the process pathogenetic reproduction, which could also be seen in layman terms as virgin birth. So the female lays the eggs in their internal organs and the eggs develop through cell division without the need for a male sperm. And then that egg develops into the juvenile, and the juvenile develops into the adult.

There is another form of reproduction that we call maternal reproduction, where all of the eggs hatch in the body of the female. It's a process that we call endotokia matricida (worm bagging), where the mother actually commits suicide to save the life of the young. It's a survival strategy; when the nematode sees that the food source is less in the environment, it lays a lot of eggs in the body and then dies so that the young ones can feed on its internal components when they hatch. The eggs will only hatch when there is a cue in the environment, a chemical cue.

So, for example in the species of potato cyst nematodes; the female will form a cyst, a hard protective cover, so that even when you spray chemicals, the juveniles are protected. And it's only when the next potato plant comes in and releases chemicals which we call root exudates that they then hatch out and then get to attach and attack the new potato plants.

Katie

Have you ever listened to soil with a recording device?

Israel

No, but it would be an amazing thing to do. I was talking to people in Tyndall National Institute to see how we can develop sensors that can record sound and tell you what is there. It would be amazing to actually listen to recordings from the soil to see which organisms were there, especially if it helps advance the science of training people, especially farmers, to identify what is in their soil. I used to work for Teagasc, so I've spent a lot of time speaking with farmers and most of them know how to get the pH of their soil. They know how to get what nutrient levels. They know how to get the grass cover of their field. But what they are really lacking is the biology, and so that is where earthworms come in, because it is what they can easily recognize.

Katie

I wonder if you could talk about how farmers can assess the soil and what levels of certain nematodes present in a soil sample can tell you? You've mentioned before that some farmers don't want you to test their soil.

Israel

So for farmers, and potato growers especially, the *Globodera rostuchensis* (the yellow potato cyst nematode) and the *Globodera pallida* (the white potato cyst nematode) are very devastating and are actually quarantine organisms in Europe. When these attack the crop, it's a total failure of the crop. What they do is that the second stage juvenile nematode, which we call the infective stage, attacks the root and secretes chemicals into the cell of the plant that will then direct every nutrient in the plant to that cell. The cell that is then formed is what we call the giant cell. And then once the nematode attaches to that giant cell, the female gets obese and forms golden cysts.

For farmers there is a threshold number of these cysts that can be found. So for example, if we find 10 cysts in a field, the farmer is not allowed to grow potatoes in that field for the

next year- they must put in another crop. And that's not what farmers want. They want to be able to produce an economic crop. It's their livelihood. So potato farmers don't want us testing their field. But it is necessary, otherwise the cysts are going to multiply. As long as the food source is there, the nematodes are going to multiply. In one female cyst, you can have up to 200 eggs. And all they need is the next potato crop coming in the field for them to multiply.

Katie

So is crop rotation a better idea?

Israel

Some plants like the marigold (tagetes) secrete chemicals that would create a false release into the soil, where the nematode would think that the potato was there and they would come out and starve to death. You can do crop rotation where you bring in a plant who is not a host plant for the nematode, because some of these nematodes, especially the devastating ones, are host-specific. So if it is attacking potato, it will not attack maybe corn. It will not attack grass. So if you rotate and you starve the nematodes for one year, then you can reduce the number. Yeah.

Katie

In our earlier meeting, you spoke fondly of earthworms as soil engineers and how they secrete mucus particles which form aggregates. Can you explain this?

Israel

The earthworms act as soil engineers. As they move through the soil, they move air and materials from the topsoil downwards, mixing it and causing that aeration needed for other soil organisms and the cycling of nutrients. They also move plant materials downwards, taking carbon deep into the soil where it is stored. That carbon could have easily been evaporated into the atmosphere, causing global warming, but they take that back into the earth.

When we talk about soil aggregates, it's what gives the structure to the soil to hold it in place. It's what makes a soil either compacted or non-compacted. So, the aggregates are referring to the various sizes of the particles that are found in soil. We have sand, silt, and clay, depending on the size of these particles. And this in turn determines the type of soil that you have. As earthworms move in the soil, they secrete sticky, gelatinous substances that bring these soil particles together and give it a nice structure. And in that case, your soil is in good condition; it's not compact and you won't have water logging leading to flooding and/or erosion.

Katie

From your research of these different ideas of agriculture, nematodes and the biological environment, what do you hope to see in the future?

Israel

There are some European projects that I'm involved in where we are trying to develop biological solutions and agricultural or farming systems that are sustainable. It's not about producing food for just today, but how we can continuously get that stewardship from soils to produce our crops to feed the 10 billionth person that will be born in the next year.

All life depends on soil. There can be no soil without life and there can be no life without soil; that's a famous quote from Charles Edwin Kellogg, who was one of the famous directors of the United States Department of Agriculture. We must support the soil and the life within the soil to make sure that we can continue to produce food. I would like us to see more support in terms of designing systems that are sustainable for the soil, sustainable for the environment and that protect plant production.

Dr. Israel Ikoyi is a lecturer in Environmental Science at the University College Cork School of Biological Earth and Environmental Sciences.

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