

WANDERING AENGUS
Recurring Motifs In The Work Of Colum McCann,
Carminé José Cela, Dannyé Romine Powell, Cormac McCarthy,
and Justin Cronin

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*I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies*
—W. B. Yeats

Borrowing from centuries-old Irish myth, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) in his “The Song of Wandering Aengus” sent his protagonist to the river with a hazel twig and a berry tied with a thread, and brought him home again with a fish that, when he turned his back on it, became “a glimmering girl” who disappeared into thin air. This literary shaman’s maneuver has given rise to a long-lived tradition of verbal/spiritual magic practiced by Colum McCann, Carmine Jose Cela, Dannye Romine Powell, Cormac McCarthy, and Justin Cronin, among contemporary writers who have rediscovered in the poem, and in the myth that gave rise to it, a wealth of possibilities.

In the Yeats poem, the speaker, presumably Aengus, cannot forget:

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun. (32-33)

But who, in the grand sweep of Irish myth and history, was Aengus?

One of the Tuatha de Daanan, Aengus Mac Og (Aengus the Young)—also Angus, Oengus, or Aonghus—may at one time have been regarded as a god of youth, love, and poetic inspiration. In *The Crock Of Gold*, James Stephens describes him: “The god was very radiant, smiling like the young morn when the buds awake, and to his lips song

came instead of speech.” In aspect, this Aengus seems almost Christlike—no surprise, given that the earliest stories were not written down till well after Ireland had been thoroughly Christianized.

In *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* translator Jeffrey Gantz suggests that “The Dream of Oengus,” which the book reproduces, is the ultimate source of Yeats’s poem; however, there are several other stories about Aengus, and several versions of this tale. In one version, Aengus Mac Og, his head continually buzzed by the four singing birds that always accompany him and which may have inspired the xxxx signed as kisses by lovers, is visited in his sleep by Caer Ibormeith, a faery maid so beautiful that her disappearance as he wakes causes him to fall ill. With the help of his parents, Aengus tracks Caer, who in some versions he calls Aeslinga (Dream Maiden), to Loch Bel Dracon where she lives with 149 (or 150) other maidens, each imprisoned in the form of a swan and tethered in place by a chain of either silver or gold. He arrives on November 1, the first day of the maidens’ yearlong captivity. To win Caer from among them, Aengus transforms himself into a swan and calls to her, proving his love and thereby breaking the chain. The pair flies away, singing a song so sweet it puts everyone who hears it into a deep sleep for three days and nights.

Aside from the faery maid’s initial vanishing act, the story gives us little to go on in tracing how the poem took form in the magic cauldron of Yeats’s imagination; but that little, based on the oldest of the traditional cycles of Irish myth, legend, and history, has preserved its potent allure. The early Irish stories contained in the book, “first written down in the eighth century AD,” according to the Penguin Classics website, “are masterpieces of passion and vitality, and form the foundation for the Irish literary

tradition: a mythic legacy that was a powerful influence on the work of Yeats, Synge and Joyce.”

In the years since Yeats brought the myth of the Wandering Aengus forward in literary time, other writers, too, have been entranced by the songs of those circling birds. Among them are Dublin-born novelist Colum McCann, who consistently draws upon Yeats’s version of ancient Irish myth; Jose Carmine Cela, who borrows directly from it; Dannye Romine Powell, who draws upon Cela; Cormac McCarthy, and Justin Cronin, who pay homage to Yeats in keeping the old knowledge of faith and magic alive in their own work.

Colum McCann

Like an obsession, images of rivers, fish, and maps come back and back throughout McCann’s stories, which always have to do with water—its force and power, its dangers and blessings, its vastness, its necessary beauty, its ability to separate, and through the sad magic of distance perhaps even alienate husbands and wives, lovers, siblings, parents and children. Its ability to transform—a transformation as profound as communication, maybe even some unimaginable, seemingly impossible form of resurrection—and perhaps bring again back to shore the people and things we thought irretrievably lost.

These motifs weave through McCann’s primary themes of emigration, loss, distance, and alienation in ways that are elegant demonstrations of how much can be done with how little: some small repeated thought or bit of business, some object—a map, say, or a fish—perhaps not even an actual fish, but the potent *idea* of fish and all its

mythical connotations forever turning up in one form or another just where it's needed, where it can be counted on as trigger for epiphany, an agent of change.

McCann's ability to carry us across oceans, geographic and geopolitical borders and the boundaries between fact, longing, and imagination allows us to observe the workings of human hearts adrift in distance and alienation. By means of recurring motifs based in Yeats's ancient myth, he shows us patterns that illuminate both grief and desire, and speak to our common history. His "Fishing the Sloe-Black River" (*Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, 1993) begins:

The women fished for their sons in the sloe-black river that ran through the small Westmeath town, while the fathers played football without their sons, in a field half a mile away. Low shouts drifted like lazy swallows over the river, interrupting the silence of the women. They were casting with ferocious hope, twenty-six of them in unison, in a straight line along the muddy side of the low-slung river wall, whipping the rods back over their shoulders. They had pieces of fresh bread mashed onto hooks so that when they cast their lines, the bread volleyed out over the river and hung for a moment, making curious contours in the air—cartwheels and tumbles and plunges. The bread landed with a soft splash on the water, and the ripples met each other gently. (135)

"Fishing" is a four-page parable packed tight with the longing of parents whose sons and daughters have emigrated to find work in other places, from which they are unlikely to return. McCann has given this story an entirely new wardrobe: not just one

new suit but several, the cut varying from telling to telling, the fabric always, somehow, recognizably Irish.

McCann's first novel, *Songdogs*, begins with the return of an emigrated Irish son, Conor: his unannounced visit home to find:

not even the river itself knew it was a river anymore. Wide and brown, with a few plastic bags sitting in the reeds, it no longer made a noise at its curves. A piece of Styrofoam was wrapped around one of the footbridge poles. Some oil boated lazily on the surface, throwing colours in the afternoon sun.

“Yet still the old man was fishing away.

The afternoon wears on, the hidden son watching his old father, till he: ran his hands lovingly along the glass pole, flicked it back for one last cast. A pile-up of line hit the water noisily. The river skipped. It was an instant of concurrency. The sunlight caught the droplets and coloured them as they rose, and it struck me then that the old man and the water are together in all of this—they have lived out their lives disguised as one another, the river and him, once wild with movement, churning new ways, violently ripping along, now moving slowly down towards some final, unalterable sea. (3)

Conor's father is a photographer who years before emigrated from Ireland to a village in Mexico, where he married a much younger girl—the boy's mother—and became fascinated with intricate, highly colored maps made by Miguel, the young son of a villager:

Miguel drew magenta oceans, white mountains, green rivers, purple roads, a red tongue of river, and sometimes he rubbed a little soil on the maps to give the countryside a brown tint. If you put your nose to the maps, you could smell the soil. The cities were shown with little pieces of metal that could rip the tips of your fingers if you ran your hands along them. My father moved the maps from wall to wall, switching them from the kitchen to the living room and back again so that he felt as if he were going somewhere. (53)

Maps, which in *Songdogs* signify the father's obsession with travel, with movement, the next road, the next town, also show up in McCann's novel *This Side of Brightness*, which chronicles the work of sandhogs digging a tunnel under the East River, and of Treefrog, an obsessive-compulsive homeless man who years later survives a harsh winter in the tunnel, killing rats, scavenging soda cans, and making maps of his own:

He has hundreds of small graphs and one giant map on a sheet of art paper, carefully rolled and precisely tied with a shoelace. Treefrog spreads a plastic bag on the floor so the paper doesn't get covered in muck. He opens the shoelace and unrolls the map. The one thing he hates is having to use the eraser, but it is necessary when he gets a new reading. Here, the bedside table, rising up to a plateau. A long butte for his mattress. Circular mounds for the rise in the dirt floor. A cave for the Gulag. All elevations marked in tiny increments. Delicately he scrubs out a contour and widens it for a new reading he made of the cave wall this morning after the woman's visit; he may have been wrong, his hands were trembling after he saw her. (73-74)

These recurring scenes of fishing for lost people, and maps of various kinds—sets of directions for finding lost places, or the places lost people might be—must hold special meaning for McCann, something more than useful fictive device and technique. Perhaps it has to do with his own experience of alienation and distance; a desire for connection—not just between people and places, but between one time and another, one set of perceptions and another, far different.

There is fishing, as well as maps, in *This Side of Brightness*, but it is fishing of a different kind. Early on, it's the frantic attempt to rescue three sandhogs shot from the tunnel and up through the surface of the East River by a pressure blowout. Years later it's Faraday, one of the tunnel's homeless colony, who's been "fishing" for electricity and is blown to kingdom come in a scene with what seems a deliberate Christian subtext: the fisherman subsumed by electric current, the thief who runs off with the rod, the fabulous unseen fish:

Faraday—they hear later—had gone fishing for electricity way downtown in the Second Avenue tunnel. He went to help someone hook up a transformer, but on the way he found a fishing rod in a Bowery dumpster. He was sprung after snorting heroin and wanted to test the rod out. Whisking it through the air, Faraday descended through the emergency manhole cover into the Second Avenue tunnel. He stood at the edge of the tracks and played riverbank with the darkness, whisked the rod like a dream above his head. The little fly hook at the end of the line went spinning out and down toward the tracks, then came up again and jiggled in the air as Faraday lassoed (sic) the rod back over his shoulder. It happened in an instant: he stumbled and fell across the tracks and touched his

hand against the third rail. The current sucked him in and his body went lengthwise against the metal, and the fishing rod completed the circuit. He must have been a corpse of wild blue sparks. Every fluid in his body boiled first, all the blood and water and semen and alcohol boiling down to nothing. Six hundred volts of direct current blew a hole in the top of his head. The cops had to turn the electricity off before they could peel him from the rail. They placed a bit of his brain in a blue plastic bag, one of the cops puking up at the sight, and the people who lived in the tunnel stood around, staring, saying nothing, although one of them later ran off with the rod—Angela was sure it must have been Jigsaw—saying there were beautiful rainbow trout to be found in the puddles under the platforms, the most fabulous rainbow trout ever seen in the city. (153-154)

This incident shines considerable light on McCann's other fishing scenes, in which religious undertones also can be detected. Ending *This Side of Brightness*, Clarence Nathan Walker—also known as Treefrog—grandson of Nathan Walker, sole survivor of the tunnel blow-out, has come full circle back to himself and his history, his ancestry, “the gift of blood.”

Leaning over the side of his nest, Clarence Nathan looks down into the shadows, and with half a grin he says to the darkness, “Our resurrections aren't what they used to be.” (285)

But he turns and he hops and he knows it might be untrue, and, landing on the ground, in the tunnel, amid the detritus of his life, knees bowed, heart

thumping, he lets a word rest upon his tongue, just once, it rests there, a thing of imbalance. (289)

Like the Host, likewise placed on the tongue.

Leaving the tunnel for the last time, Treefrog, now Clarence Nathan, feels:

“...a great lightness in his body, not a single shadow cast in the tunnel. And at the gate he smiles, hefting the weight of the word upon his tongue, all its possibility, all its beauty, all its hope, a single word: resurrection” (289).

But the maps? Beyond descriptions of a character’s world, what are those about?

In *Songdogs*, Conor suggests they are far more:

The year was 1949, and [my father] was over the cusp of his thirties—if he couldn’t go in reality he would go in his imagination. At times he took my mother’s hand and led her all the way around the world within that small house...(53)

So much a wanderer had his life made Conor’s father Michael Lyons that drink, even delivered by his lovely wife Juanita, whose nude body was the subject of his best photos, could not assuage his longing for new places, something other, something more than what he had:

For a while he slept outside...It was viciously cold at night, with no clouds in the sky to hold in the heat, and sometimes my father might have thought about walking forever, skimming over the arroyos and the cacti and the flowers that

held water with a startling parsimony. There were plants that would bloom only once every hundred years. He went searching, but never found one of them in bloom. (57)

...
That night [my father] drank a jug of wine on his own, and in his imagination he was in New York City... He razored the beard off his cheeks, ran a comb through his hair, looked down the mountain, wondered where he and Mam would go.

Young Miguel's maps might have flashed through his mind. The smell of clay. All those jagged edges for cities. (121)

Eventually, Conor's father takes his Mexican wife home to Ireland, where through the years she continues to pose nude for him, till, having discovered his publication of those photographs, which she regards as the betrayal of her privacy and Lyons views as just reward for his life work, she burns down his darkroom—and all copies of the book—then disappears. For his father, Conor explains:

if a moment existed in a photograph, it was held in that particular stasis for ever. It was as if by taking a photo he could, at any moment, reinhabit an older life—one where a body didn't droop, or hair didn't fall out, or a future didn't have to exist. Time was held in the centre of his fist. ... It was as if he believed that something that *was* has the power to be what *is*. It was his own particular ordering of the universe, a pattern that moved from past to present, with the ease of a sheet dropped into a chemical bath. (23)

It's an idea much like that held by Yeats's Wandering Aengus, who sets off "with a fever in my head," imagines the transformation of a caught fish and somehow believes so completely in the idea of the glimmering girl it seems to become that he is willing to search for her forever. Not so different, in fact, from Yeats himself, who never got over the loss of—or, rather, the failure to capture—his elusive first love, Maude Gonne.

Conor, grown like Aengus with a fever in his head, leaves home in anger, and sets off in search of his mother. He fails to find traces of her in her village in Mexico, but in Miguel's house there he finds fantastic maps that resemble Treefrog's less sophisticated maps in *This Side of Brightness*, the landscape and the people who lived upon it assuming a single identity:

Maps hung on the walls. They dotted the hallway, light coming on them from a fancy glass chandelier. Miguel had grown artistically. Now he made faces from contour maps—geological and ordinance surveys with eyes from history staring out of them. All sorts of Mexican revolutionaries were drawn within the valleys and the troughs, the towns sometimes used for eyes, hills for hair, the rivers for arms... The strange thing was that Miguel didn't have to distort the lines—he had stayed true to the contours and the faces were fluid within them.

(65)

In the novel's present, shortly after Conor's return, the old man "went fishing until nightfall, six hours of ferocious stupidity, for nothing this time, not a bite." (123) However, the old man is not fishing for his emigrated son, but for his long-missing wife. The boy, too, has been gone many years, searching for his mother Juanita in her native

Mexico, where he encountered Miguel and his maps—much more elaborate now, the work of a real artist—but found no trace of his mother.

In a photograph Conor describes later in the book, he notes that his mother, who “has been scrubbing for many hours,” has, on her hands:

Remnants of white washing powder under the nails. The tops of the fingers are puffy and the skin is loose from so much water. It is strange the patterns that are made in her hands. The fingerprint lines seem to become much more prominent, so that the rings at the top of each finger are bigger to the eye. Maps on her fingers. Far away, a boy named Miguel could lodge dirt in the fingernails and make a work of art from it. Mexican earth, the good earth. (137)

Watching the old man on the riverbank, Conor thinks:

it would be lovely if I could see him cast in the way he used to...back when the river was alive, those flicks of the wrist like so many fireflies on the bank, the hooks glinting in the lapel of his overcoat, that huge sadness of his disappearing as the rod whipped away, him counting under his breath, one-two-three-here-we-go, lassoing it to the wind, brisk upward motion of the tip of the glass rod, sometimes drying off the flies by false casting, finally watching them curl out over the water and plonk, reeling the surface into soft circles, stamping his feet on the bank, spitting out over the water, all sorts of hidden violence in the motion. (15-16)

Later in his week-long visit home, Conor's father at last speaks about what may have become of his wife, the night of the fire, all those years before:

'Conor,' he said.

I peeped back through the crack in the door. 'What?'

'I really have no idea.'

'What?'

'About your Mam.' ... 'Just walked out from there,' he said. 'Didn't even know she'd left until Mrs. O'Leary came around and told me. I was knocking the rest of the darkroom down with the big hammer. Turning it to mush. Played it over and over in my head ever since. Thought she'd be back. Swore it to myself. Didn't give it much thought until a few hours later. Then a day. Then two days. Three. Sometimes I even think she could have walked her way down to the river beyond. She was awful depressed, you know.'

'The river?'

'I don't know. Anything's possible, isn't it?'

'You mean she walked her way into the river?'

'Maybe.'

...'The river, Dad?' I said from outside, but he mustn't have heard me, the bathwater gurgling down the drain. (208-209)

Here, fishing is clearly about loss. But there is something unsettling about disappearances like Juanita's. The fact of being not visibly, provably dead, not having been seen gone or going away, getting into a car, onto a bus, ship, train or plane, or

placed in a coffin, can lead to fanciful supposition. Elvis seen at the bakery. President Kennedy at McLendon's, Michael Landon checking out polyester slacks down at Wal-Mart, John Lennon singing in a revival meeting choir. Full-grown alligators in the sewers. Rainbow trout under the subway platforms in underground New York.

Even when a person is certifiably dead, we sometimes think we see their ghosts—lights flickering, tables tipping, phones ringing, chairs rapping, bedcovers snatched right off the foot of the bed, phantom current streaking up the length of a fishing rod. We so *want* to believe in the possibility of return. McCann's characters convey the attraction of that belief, even in the face of all that refutes it.

Having laid out his lines—Yeats's fey girl/fish gone again to the river—McCann draws back to speak to us about the possible shapes Conor's mother is thought, by his father's Irish neighbors, to have perhaps taken, the places she is conjectured to have perhaps gone:

She had gone to Chile, where she had fallen in love with a military dictator. She had been seen in Dublin with nasturtiums behind her ears. She had taken a boat out into the storm. She was in the mental hospital in Castlebar, behind the big yawning gates... (209)

It was an easy leap. A colorful, exotic bird far off her own flyway, Juanita aroused rumors when she began working in the local tavern:

She was a former lover of Che Guevara. She was Jack Dempsey's girl. She was an orphan from the slums of Central America. She had failed in Hollywood. She was a daughter of Franco. She was in flight from a revolution. She had once

owned a hacienda in southern Mexico, lost it all in a game of bridge. Or maybe she was a model for the old man's camera, perhaps even posed for him, nude. The latter rumour—the one they eventually embraced—may have caused a peculiar quickness in their dentures, the shaky lifting of a glass to the mouth. (161-162)

“Water is what we are made of,” Conor observes. “It has its own solitude.” (209)

In the aftermath of his mother's disappearance a storm delayed the search for her, and in it, his father took to sleeping outside Conor's bedroom door at night. For the next year and a half, Conor remembers:

stories coming from him each evening, like hallucinogenic prayers, magnificent dreamscapes, while I—brutally young—waited for a knock on the door, twirling a gold ring in my hand. It was a couple of years later that I came home from school wearing the earring. He had begun his fishing then, every day he would go down to the river. (208-209)

Travel, in all McCann's novels, is a drug, a long dream—the nightmare search for a home either lost, or never found in the first place. Despite the high-minded and inevitably disillusioned romantic ideals held by several of his characters, including Conor Lyons, Nureyev, and Stephen Swann, the author himself reveals himself far more clear-eyed. In *Songdogs* he says through Conor: “Bus stations are among the saddest places in America. Everyone looking for a way out. Slinking around. Looking for lost children. Keeping eyes glued on nothing in particular, waiting for life to happen” (130).

In relating the Navajo tale of coyotes, named songdogs and thought to have sung in the Big Bang of the world, Conor identifies his parents as his own personal songdogs,

having ushered in the universe of themselves on their wedding day:

And maybe they did. Maybe there was a tremendous howl that reached its way all across the desert. But the past is a place that is full of energy and imagination. In remembering, we can distil the memory down. We can manage our universe by stuffing it into the original quark, the point of burstingness.

It's the lethargy of the present that terrifies us all. The slowness, the mundanity, the sheer plod of each day. Like my endless hours spent strolling through Mexico. And my father's constant casting these days. His own little songdog noise of a fishing line whisking its way through the air. (73)

There's also an arch last reference to Yeats's hazel twig, which Aengus uses as a fishing pole, and Michael uses to spear litter:

An unrolled condom was lying in the small brown pool beyond the reeds, and he was staring at it—'Fucken litterbugs, the lot of them,' he said, pointing toward the town, 'up there.'

He picked up a dead branch from the side of the river which curved at its bottom end in a V, like a divining stick... He took a red knife out of his pocket, used the fingernail of the thumb to take out the blade, fumbled to whittle the branch down to a sharp point.... shrugged and bent down to the reeds, holding the stick, balancing himself with it. I took a grip of his arm so he wouldn't fall in. He leaned further, caught the condom on the sharpened point, where it teetered for a moment, fell again.

'Ah, fuck it.'

‘Leave it be,’ I said.

He moved his arm out of my grip... lifted the condom on one of the V ends, and suddenly burst into laughter as he raised it in the air, dangling it absurdly.

‘A million fucken fishes in that thing,’ he said, ‘and I’m not even using me rod!’ (188-189)

One last time before Conor leaves, back to the riverbank they go, he and old Michael, who suddenly sees, in the brown remnant of the river, the idea of a great, living, luminous fish:

‘Look at that!’ he shouted, ‘Look!’

I looked around and there was nothing, absolutely nothing, not even a ripple. But I know what he saw. Caught in mid-twist in the air, the flash of belly shining, contorted and unchoreographed in its spin, reaching out over the surface so the skips were alight in the air around it, fins tucked in, tail in a whisk throwing off droplets, making a massive zigzag of itself, three feet over the surface, mouth open to gulp air, eyes huge and bulbous, a fringe of water around it—place and motion caught together, as in one of the old photos—reaching up, the whole surface of the water in a frenzy beneath it, so that the flow jiggled and freed itself from its home within the reeds, went down towards the sea, the grass itself bending to the movement, until the salmon hit a zenith and it retreated headfirst into the water with a magical sound, a chorus of plops, erupting like weather, and the water knew something about itself and became all at once quiet

and there was joy there, I felt it, marvelous, unyielding, and he leaned his shoulder against me and said: ‘Fucken hell, amazing, wasn’t it?’

...’Yeah, I saw it.’

He gave a grin, fixed the reel... spun out some line, caressed the length of the rod, all the time whistling through his teeth as he whipped the rod back and forth above his head, fluidity to it, the swish and swerve, casting away as if there was no tomorrow, none at all, just casting away with all his might. (211-212)

Sometimes, McCann lets us see, hope is a thing with fins.

There is no physical map in McCann’s “Everything in This Country Must” (*Everything in This Country Must*, 2000) unless it is the map of stark anger and unrelenting grief that has molded the face of Katie’s father as surely as it has the landscape of Ireland. The story is told in a highly-charged language as 15-year-old Katie holds the head of her father’s favorite draft horse above the tide and the father, who is afraid of water, submerges himself for long minutes again and again, trying to free the big Belgian’s trapped foot. With the unexpected aid of Protestant soldiers, the river is forced to give up its intended victim, but the father, whose wife and son were accidentally killed by Protestant soldiers some years before, is unwilling to accept the soldiers’ help—so unwilling that when the horse has been saved, he shoots it.

Hard as it is to imagine that kind of stubborn refusal, McCann makes it believable through the force of his language and the raw grief of its major action:

Bastards, said Father in a whisper, *bastards*, and he put his arm around me and sat watching until Stevie came up from the water, swimming against the current to

stay in one place. He shouted up at Hayknife *Her leg's trapped*, and then *I'm gonna try and get the hoof out*. Stevie took four big gulps of air and Hayknife was pulling on the halter rope and the draft horse was screaming like I never heard a horse before or after. Father was quiet and I wanted to be back in the barn alone waiting for drips on my tongue. I was wearing Stevie's jacket but I was shivering and wet and cold and scared because Stevie and the draft horse were going to die since everything in this country must. (10)

The unrelenting rush of emotion in this story is created and maintained through McCann's use of compression, of italics to streamline visual indication of direct quotes, and by the stripped-down simplicity of Katie's speech. The horse saved by the kindness of soldiers is sacrificed on the altar of the father's prejudice and anger—a waste of life that only adds fuel to the flames of the seemingly unending Irish Troubles:

I heard the living room door shut, then the kitchen door, then the pantry door where Father keeps his hunting rifle, then the front door, and I heard the sound of the clicker on the rifle and him still crying going farther and farther away until the crying was gone and he must have been in the courtyard standing in the rain.

The clock on the mantelpiece sounded very loud, so did the rain, so did my breathing, and I looked out the window.

It was all near empty on the outside road and the soldiers were going around the corner away when I heard the sounds; it wasn't like bullets, it was more like pops one two three.

The clock still ticked.

It ticked and ticked and ticked... (16)

As Yeats's Aengus observes, "till time and times are done."

In *Dancer*, McCann's novel based on the life of Rudolph Nureyev, time and travel continue their inevitable intersection. Here, fishing takes place even in Russia in the dead cold of a World War II winter:

In the fishing hamlets by the Sea of Azov they fished instead for pilots who had crashed and skidded three hundred meters along the ice. Guttled buildings lined the outskirts of towns and, in them, more dead in their havoc of blood. They found their comrades hung from lampposts, grotesque decorations, tongues black with ice. When they cut them down the lamps groaned and bent and changed the spread of their light.

...*They sang songs to their own absent children* [italics mine], but moments later they put the stub of a rifle in an enemy boy's mouth and, later again, they sang other songs, Raven oh black raven why do you circle me?

...Crows patrolled the aftermath, fat on the dead, and then the crows themselves were shot and eaten. Nature was turned around—the mornings were dark with bomb dust and at night the fires cast light for miles. (8-9)

It's a nightmarish vision, the fishing for crashed pilots, the comrades hung from lampposts, the shift in the light when the hanged bodies are cut away, the singing, the crows... a vision that is the very antithesis of Yeats's own, and yet not out of keeping

with the blacker aspects of the ancient, pre-Christian Irish myths that fed his imagery. In *Dancer*, the nightmare persists, turns and returns, folding in on itself like a series of maps to unknown, unseen territory.

Yulia, older than Nureyev, daughter of his first ballet teacher, tells of her parents' visit to Leningrad, where her father acquires a map of the city:

At night he spread out the map on the kitchen table and occupied his time by identifying street names that had changed.

Look, he said to nobody in particular, Ship Street has become Red Street, how strange.

He marked all the changes, the post-Revolutionary places that had lost their history. English Embankment was now Red Fleet Embankment, Swimming Pool Street was renamed after the poet Nekrasov. Ascension Street naturally had been changed, along with Resurrection Street, where an Orthodox church had been converted into a department store... (88)

Like so many in that disorienting and disoriented time and place, the old man from Nureyev's hometown of Ufa and his wife—Nureyev's own mother, too—simply couldn't adjust. Yulia explains: "It wasn't that [her father] had lost faith in his past, but it had become unrecognizable to him, as if he had expected to find the logic of his boyhood but found something else entirely" (88).

Young Nureyev, on the other hand, at first absorbs change like a happy chameleon, easily assuming different surfaces—taller boots, longer scarves—acquiring a genuine appreciation for art and literature in studies with Pushkin, practicing, practicing,

improving his hang-time, and breathing the very essence of dance in duet performances with the celebrated Margo Fonteyne while sinking ever deeper into an increasingly risky homosexual underworld he hides only casually. Soviet spies follow him everywhere as his fame grows, and he assumes the feverish pace of international celebrity.

In Paris in the mid-sixties, the dancer defects to the West, crossing the geographic, geopolitical and cultural borders between his beloved mother in Ufa and his monumentally tangled personal life in a leap it would take many lonely years to reverse. When at last he is allowed to return to Ufa, he arrives bearing useless, extravagant gifts to find his mother is near death and doesn't even recognize him. Here, McCann gives us a clear indication of the novel's unwinding as Yulia writes: "Sasha says the known way leads us to the unknown. Also, it is the unknown way that will finally lead us back to what is known" (96).

In June 1964, after his defection and subsequent sentencing to seven years of hard labor makes it necessary for him to stay away from the home he now desperately misses, McCann's Nureyev writes to his sister Tamara:

To be away from home is to be away from everything that made me. And to be away from everything that made me, when it dies, is my own death.

Darkness touches darkness everywhere...

I go from country to country. I am a non-person where I became a person. I am stateless. So it is. And so it has always been, even I suppose since our days in Ufa. It is dance, and dance only, that keeps me alive.

Goethe says: Such a price the gods exact for song, to become what we sing. (159)

In Yeats's poem, Aengus wanders the Irish landscape like a Gypsy, never once regretting his youthful, impetuous, romantic commitment to a life away from the place of his birth. But then, Aengus never leaves Ireland, vows only to keep moving across its hollow and hilly lands in search of an unattainable ideal. McCann's characters are less classically heroic than Yeats's; they are older, perhaps wiser, their youthful impatience worn down by experience, and far more realistic, despite the call of imagination and belief that still moves in them, now and then bursting through the fog of nightmare to the Bright World beyond—a place for which no maps exist.

And yet, McCann allows, we need maps to help us locate ourselves in relation to the rest of the universe, and lacking them, will make our own. In *Brightness*, which takes place almost entirely underground, Treefrog says in conversation with Angela, another tunnel dweller whom he attempts to protect from her consort Elijah:

I'd like to make a map of your face.

What you talking about, [Angela says] a map of my face?

Just a map.

Maps for driving with, motherfucker.

He passes the cigarette, and she drags hard even though the filter is burning. "Maps?" she says.

I keep maps. Sometimes I make maps.

What the hell you make maps for? It's not as if you're going anywheres.

(190-191)

In making his map of Angela, Treefrog first touches her carefully, registering each depression and elevation of her face, her many-times broken nose, “the bruise on the middle of her cheek—the topography of violence—and he tries to skim the very edge of her skin where it must be colored blue.” (192)

If she cries, he wonders, will he be able to stop the water with his fingers so that the tense molecules might be arrested for a single second, become forever a part of her face? But she doesn’t cry, and his fingers move a little more quickly now, away from the bruise. (192)

Aengus, whose glimmering girl melts away into the “hollow lands and hilly lands” of the poem’s landscape, vows to pursue her “till time and times are done.” Treefrog attempts to capture Angela’s essence not with berry, thread and hazel twig, but in the immediate moment, by mapping the hills and hollows of her battered, soot-stained face:

He works with great care, making sure that the lines are consistent, uniform, unwavering, that a gentle curve appears between dots, that the graph doesn’t become jittery or messy. He never once uses the eraser. The lighter and the pencil are switched from hand to hand, his fingers shaking in the cold. Angela looks over his shoulder, her chin on his overcoat, saying, ‘This is about the stupidest thing I have ever seen.’

When Treefrog is finished, he holds the paper up and show Angela the rise and curl of her face—the canyons and ridges and riverbeds and hanging valleys that she has become. (193)

‘Where’d you learn to do this?’

‘I taught myself. I been making maps for a long time.’

‘You ever do it for anyone else?’

‘I did it for Dancesca.’

‘Who’s she?’

‘I told you about her. And Lenora too. My little girl.’

‘Where is she?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Nobody knows where I is either,’ says Angela. (194)

On no map of the heart’s interior, McCann tells us, can the gold and silver apples, or the glimmering girl of Yeats’s fantasy, be found.

McCann’s most recent novel, *Zoli* (2006), brings together the threads of water, fish and maps that first appear in his earlier work. In the author’s note at the book’s end, he says, “*Zoli* is loosely inspired by the life of Bronislaw Wajs (Papusza), the Polish poet who lived from 1910 to 1987.” Ellen Emry Heltzel, writing in *The Seattle Times*, January 7, 2007, notes that Papusza’s life “spanned the momentous middle decades of the 20th century... in her native Eastern Europe as it ricocheted from one political extreme to another [as] first the Nazis and then the Communists placed a boot at society’s neck while professing to liberate it.”

Like McCann’s other novels, *Zoli*, too, involves the crossing of water, geopolitical borders, and boundaries at once physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. The story opens on Zoli Novotna’s memory of returning, a child of six, from a trip with her grandfather:

My hair was cut short. I'd hacked it off with a knife. I tell this to you directly, there is no other way to say it—my mother was gone, my father, my brother, my sisters and cousins too. They had been driven out on the ice by the Hlinka guards. Fires were lit in a ring around the shore, and guns were pointed so they could not escape. The caravans were forced to the middle of the lake as the day grew warmer. The ice cracked, the wheels sank, and the rest followed, harps and wheels and horses... although there was great music to come along later, sweet sounding moments when our people were raised up and strong and valued, that will always be a time of looking backwards, listening and waiting for my dead family to catch up. (15)

But the caravans had gone down and all but Zoli and her grandfather drowned, sinking into the lake's frozen weather as if they had never been.

What follows is the moving tale of how Zoli/Papusza becomes, as Heltzel writes, “a flash point for her tribe while raising an important question: In a world driven by conformity and (more lately) consumerism, how can the outsider survive?”

Taught to read and write by her grandfather, in flagrant violation of Romani tradition, Zoli's skills as singer and poet keep her on the run from first the Nazis and then the Communists, who count on her to convince other Gypsy bands to settle down, give up their cherished freedom—in accordance with Law 74, the End of Nomadism, the Big Halt—for the shabby mundanity of state housing. When the Romani refuse, the Communists force the issue by burning the very old, beautifully decorated wheels of hundreds of Romani caravans.

Stephen Swann, the English translator who becomes Zoli's lover, tells part of the story, including his own background, which is remarkably similar to Conor Lyons' in *Songdogs*: his mother an Irish-born nurse "forever tilted sideways by the notion that pain was inevitable, chance was cruel, and all human ingenuity should go towards the making of a good cup of tea," his father a Slovakian dockworker who "used to put a dark thumbprint on the bread in order that I would know where it came from." (66-67)

Memory, Swann observes, "has a heavy backspin, yet it's still impossible to land exactly where we took off."

Swann recalls his father saying:

...you can't gauge the contents of a man's heart by his greatest act of evil alone, but if that's true then it must also be true that you can't judge him without it: mine was committed on a freezing winter afternoon at the printing mill on Godrova Street, when I stood with Zoli Novotna and betrayed her against the hum of the machinery. Since I've done little worse, or measurably better, in the days before or since then, I'm forced to admit that my legacy to the world may very well be this one solitary thing that's with me now almost every breathing moment.

There are those of us who haven't yet told our stories, or refuse to tell them, and so we become them: we hide away inside the memory until we can no longer stand the shell or the shock—perhaps that's me, or perhaps I must tell it before it's forgotten or becomes, like everything else, something else. (66)

As a writer—a translator of poetry—Swann travels to Czechoslovakia to work with Martin Stransky, editor and publisher of *Credo*, a radical Socialist journal, and there

meets Zoli Novotna, whom Stransky had gained the Romani elders' permission to interview about her songs.

[Stransky] was sure that having a Gypsy poet would be a coup for him, for *Credo...* 'Look,' he said, 'everywhere else they're the joke of the week. Thieves. Conmen. Just imagine if we could raise them up. A literate proletariat. People reading Gypsy literature...Imagine that, Swann. Nobody has ever done that. This girl is perfect, do you know how perfect she is?

He leaned forward, his glass shaking.

'Everyone else has shat on them from above. Burned them out. Taunted them. Branded them. Capitalists, fascists, that old empire of yours. We've got a chance to turn it around. Take them in. We'll be the first. Give them a value. We make life better, we make life fairer, it's the oldest story of all.'

'She's a singer,' I said.

'She's a poet,' he replied. 'And you know why?' He raised his glass and prodded my chest. 'Because she's called upon to become one. She's a voice from the dust.' (83)

For McCann—like Yeats before him—there is great value in the old land, the old ways, the old myths, the old songs, whether of Irish or Gypsy origin; in the very fact of their ephemeral presence, preserved in memory. It is no great hardship for Swann to hoist a borrowed tape recorder and head out to the Gypsy encampment. Like Conor, like Conor's father—perhaps even more like Miguel, who made his maps of the very earth—he has “dreamed” himself into the landscape of his father's country:

It was not the place I had foreseen—endless mountains, rushing rivers—but it didn't matter anymore, I'd become someone new and the thought of her [Zoli] held me fast... I bought her a fountain pen from the market in the old town, discovered books for her to read, gave her ink, which Conka used to stain their dresses. I began to learn as much Romani as I could. She touched my arm, looked my way. I knew it. We had begun to cross that hollow that had come between us.

(91)

That hollow. The hollow lands and hilly lands that lie between dreamer and dream, between ourselves and our hearts' desires. Seeking Zoli's elusive company, to change things for the better, make a difference in her life, and his, Swann says:

I wandered the winter camp. Rusted scrap metal. Severed cables. Bent petrol drums. Dog bones. Punctured cans. The tongues of carriages. Whole matrices of lost things... The men stood around as if waiting for what might fall from the teeth of horses. I wanted nothing more than to bring Zoli to the city, settle her down, have her write, make her mine, but it was impossible, she liked it there, she was used to it, along the riverbank, she saw the dark and light of the camp as the one same thing. (100)

At one point in the story, Zoli has in her pocket something not unlike a map—an echo out of *Songdogs*: “a photograph, a shot of splintered lightning, a bright blue flash across a dark landscape. She said it came from a magazine she had found, a feature on Mexico, that someday she wouldn't mind traveling there, it was a long way, but she'd

like to go. Perhaps when things were finally good, she said, she'd take off, follow that path" (111-112).

After Swann precipitates her formal banishment from the tribe—Pollution for Life in the Category of Infamy for the Betrayal of Romani Affairs to the Outsiders (137)—by printing her poems regardless of her last-minute plea not to do so, Zoli is forced out and away, without direction or resources, guided by a series of map-like references. In one, moving aimlessly along the road, she sees a lump that looks like a body in the road behind her, then realizes it is her dropped coat. "'Idiot,' she says aloud to herself," and trudges back to pick it up where it lies "in a sprawl, one arm outstretched as if pointing in another direction" like the Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, or her own lost self. "I have sold my voice, she thinks, to the arguments of power" (141-143).

Zoli returns to the mill in Bratislava long enough to destroy the original plates from which her poems were printed, and turns her face toward Paris. Omens are thick as in the murky interior of an Irish fairytale at this point in McCann's narrative: wild geese veer into the sun, an osprey appears in a pine tree bearing a small fish in its beak, Swann rushes past on his motorbike, laboring up the bumpy road "through small countries of light and shadow," she is aided by a pair of woodsmen in a work camp for prisoners, who provide her with an actual map:

It's an old map, so it looks like it's Hungary but it's not. This is where Hungary is, along here. The other way, over here, is Austria. They'll shoot you before they lay eyes on you. Thousands of soldiers. Do you understand? Thousands. (195)

The men give Zoli a knife and show her the best way to cross the lake through its middle, where the border between Hungary and Austria is located. “They don’t patrol it with boats. And you won’t drown. They may shoot you but you won’t drown.” (196)

Days later, she sees from road signs that she has already crossed the border into Hungary.

It startles her, the ease with which she has crossed from one place into another, the landscape wholly alien and yet so much the same... it strikes her, as she walks, that borders, like hatred, are exaggerated precisely because otherwise they would cease to exist altogether. (198)

At the edge of the lake, recalling the earlier Hlinka massacre of her family, her people, Zoli is chased into the water by soldiers with guns and trained bloodhounds diverted at the last moment by the eerily magical appearance of a herd of deer. Later, recuperating in an Austrian hospital, she writes to her grown daughter Francesca, “I sometimes felt as if I were still out on the ice. I heard cracking and saw hands reaching up for me” (230).

That night at lake’s edge, the watchtower searchlight had revealed the tethered dogs and the slaughtered deer, its belly split open, its guts steaming. Zoli shed her coat and shoes, and plunged into the lake, determined that unlike her lost family, she would survive her ordeal by frozen water:

I thought then that I was not made up of flesh or muscle or bone, I was made up of strength and it would take me onto land. (224)

I think what kept me alive that dark morning, strange as it might seem, was that I [heard] an owl as he hooted long and hard, and it shocked me awake because I wanted to see in what sort of body death would arrive. It seemed to greet me with birdsong and insect noise. (225)

The merest luck, Zoli thinks, has preserved her—and in hospital over the days to come, like Treefrog regaining sanity in his subterranean cave in *This Side of Brightness*—like border crossers in every time and place—she struggles with consciousness as her old life drops away, leaving her “suspended in empty air like a shirt from a branch”—or, perhaps, an old coat mistaken for a body left in the middle of the road.

On leaving the hospital, Zoli agrees to help smuggle medical supplies across the mountains into Italy. Enrico, her guide and eventual husband, draws a map for her on the back of his hand, showing her Paris, Italy, and Rome—places she finds she no longer wishes to go.

Now in her seventies, Zoli takes McCann’s concerns into her own mouth:

Things in life have no real beginning, though our stories about them always do. ...It seems strange now after all these years... but I feared that if I tried to give written meaning to my life that I would once again lose what I had gained. There were these mountains, these silences, your father and you—these were not things I was willing to part with.

There is an old Romani song that says we share little pieces of our hearts with people and the further we go along, the less we have for ourselves until there

is not enough left to go around and that's called traveling, and it's also called death, and since it happens to us all there's nothing more ordinary than that. (221-222)

The last reference to maps in *Zoli* is an interpretation of the random patterns sprinkled sugar or salt made on sheets of metal siding she once, among the caravans, placed on a wooden sawhorse and played with a violin bow teased along the edge till the metal began to hum:

The sugar jumped and swerved and found its own vibrating patterns: standing waves, circular clumps, solitary grains, like small white acrobats... She had loved those maps, their random patterns, their odd music, the way the children clapped the sugar into place"... *chladnis*, sound charts the others called them—"the sugar settling at the points where there was least sound—and she thought, even then, that she could have looked at the metal sheet and found a whole history of her people painted there. (327)

Carmine Jose Cela, Dannye Romine Powell,
Cormac McCarthy, and Justin Cronin

The strange image that comes to *Zoli*, one late winter afternoon, of her childhood friend Conka, who after *Zoli*'s banishment left a gold coin for her under an empty tin can, has an echo of Yeats's "The Song of Wandering Aengus" as filtered through the work of Spanish poet Carmine Jose Cela and American poet Dannye Romine Powell.

Absence and presence are major themes in Powell's second book of poems, *The Ecstasy of Regret*—absence of the yearned for; presence of the unwelcome, the insidious,

the perhaps downright dangerous—and equally important, the fey, even fairytale ability of drunks, religious visionaries, and the seriously delusional, to cross the boundaries between absence and presence, the real and the imagined, perhaps at will.

Like Cela's 1953 collection of oddly disjunctive prose poems, *Mrs. Caldwell habla con su hijo* (*Mrs. Caldwell Speaks to Her Son*), Powell's poems in *Ecstasy* are told in the voice of a woman whose passions are both highly fanciful and ultra-realistic.

The heart of Powell's book resides in "Relapse," which gains much by liberal quotes from the addictively odd format of Cela's verse novel, in which an eccentric Englishwoman, Mrs. Caldwell, searches for her dead son in a manner strikingly similar to Orpheus's quest for Eurydice in the underworld, here recast in the mold of alcoholic relapse: a kind of limbo for both mother and son. In the poem, Powell's speaker attempts to find her son lost to alcohol in much the same way that Orpheus searches for Eurydice, Aengus searches for his glimmering girl, and Mrs. Caldwell searches for her son lost to death (suicide) by drowning.

In "Chapter 180: The Enchanted Garden," Cela's Mrs. Caldwell, borrowing directly from Yeats, writes:

If you had gotten lost in an abandoned garden, Eliacim, in a murky garden of willows and junipers, I would never tire of looking for you, my dear, of looking for you with lights, and with the little hazelwood wand which illuminates the waters and hidden treasures, and with a timid inexhaustible hope, until I had come upon you, perhaps changed into a blade of grass.... God's punishment, Eliacim, was worse than I expected, my dear, because I don't even have, after so many vain illusions, an abandoned garden in which to search for you ceaselessly from

morning to night, with lights, with the little hazelwood wand that illuminates the waters and hidden treasures, with a timid inexhaustible hope. (152-153)

In "Relapse," Powell's speaker tells of reading Cela's novel:

I do not talk about this or want you to either.
It's about my son. I can't give you his name.
It is lodged in my throat, a dry leaf.

Did you ever read the book, *Mrs. Caldwell Speaks to her Son*? I opened it once to a story about her dead child. I gnawed like a rat along her words. 'If you had gotten lost in an abandoned garden, Eliacim,' she wrote, 'in a murky garden of willows and junipers, I would never tire of looking for you, my dear, of looking for you with lights and with the little hazelwood wand which illuminates the waters and hidden treasures....'

Do these words stir you as they did me?
Mrs. Caldwell tells her son that as a girl she herself lived near such an abandoned garden. From morning to night, she says to him, mothers who had lost sons walked and talked senselessly, their wands lit....

Back then, she says, she laughed, immune to those miseries, as I, too, was immune to certain miseries of my own childhood behind the plumbago hedge, behind the sea-grape tree, whose coarse, fan-shaped leaves we often sprayed with gold.

Did I mention my son is alive?
What need, then, have I to wander through murky gardens, a hazelwood wand in hand?
I'll tell you my need: When I look at him, I see through his presence into his absence. I touch his shoulders and my fingers

encounter holes. It's been this way for years.
 One drink, and he'll blow
 right out of this world as you're drying
 the tablespoons. One drink
 and all I know of him evaporates. (22-23)

"I'll tell you my need." In this and others of Powell's poems in *Ecstasy*, that need, so strongly rooted in human nature, is recognized and addressed by means of nonlinear time, subjective causality, and highly unlikely scenarios—all hallmarks of the magical realism Yeats introduced into his "The Song of Wandering Aengus" through transformation of the Aengus myth. Likewise, Powell recasts Cela's fictional Mrs. Caldwell and her son into a soliloquy that encompasses the absence of the beloved, the presence of the stranger who periodically replaces the beloved/son, and the magical (or deranged) thinking of the desperately obsessed lover/mother. The tale it tells is enchanting, heart-breaking and all too recognizably real.

Powell's poem continues, bringing us first into the real world of the everyday, signified by the presence of the phone, then angles off again into her speaker's fantasy:

When he called last night, his 'hello'
 broke like a yolk into the phone. Gone
 again. So back I go, into the murky garden,
 my wand shining dimly.
 Where, where is my son?
 If I crawl along the edge of the pond,
 will I find him among the tadpoles and lilies?
 Will I find him among the worms? (23)

Back again in the "real," Powell's speaker addresses the reader in a manner that seems quite lucid, ending her soliloquy in a strange country of the mind where only hazelwood, tool of diviners, grows; where what's delusional and what's not co-exist in an uneasy and clearly unstable truce:

I must tell you, since reading *Mrs. Caldwell*,
 I have razed my house, cleared the lot.
 I now grow a healthy stand of trees,
 though as you may know, the hazel
 is not native to the Carolinas.
 When weather permits, I set up
 a table at the edge of the lane
 and carve my wands. People stop to watch.
 Some are only curious and soon wander away.
 Others feel the need to touch and rub.
 They'll try two or three, and when a wand fits
 the hand, it is a marriage of absence
 and presence. They nod. I reach
 into my basket for a new branch to burn. (24)

Powell's speaker portrays her alcoholic son as, like Eliacim, victim to his addiction—a kind of perverse Gift of the Gods—and both abandon their mothers in much the same way, and perhaps for the same reason that Yeats's Aengus goes off into the hazel wood "because a fire is in my head." In Powell's and Cela's poems the hazel wand is used as a magical means of both lighting the way and of capturing what is sought or deemed lost, while in Yeats and McCann it is almost exclusively a fishing rod, though not always used to catch literal fish.

"Chapter 174: The Fish without Scales" in Cela's *Mrs. Caldwell* describes "a fish without scales, a fish as smooth, soft and nameless as a girl," (146) a twist on Yeats's Aengus, in which the fish is transformed into a girl. This perhaps suggests Eliacim's magical transformation into both fish (which slips away from his mother) and girl (who is safe from her sexual predations), though in other chapters Mrs. Caldwell imagines her son as various kinds of animals or birds. In another twist, she says:

On top of the mantelpiece, Eliacim, the fish without scales resembled a sick girl, a dying girl, a girl who had a crow's nest lying on her fragile ribs, next to the most fickle partitions of her heart.

I tried with all my breath to revive the fish without scales, Eliacim, but the fish without scales, with his mouth wide open and his expressionless eyes, slipped out of my hand and killed himself on the floor, my son, he probably killed himself on the floor. (146)

As did Eliacim, dead of drowning—perhaps his only escape from his obsessively incestuous mother—like the son in Powell's "Relapse," who hides in alcoholism: "One drink, and he'll blow/right out of this world as you're drying/the tablespoons. One drink/and all I know of him evaporates" (23), or McCann's Conka, who in Zoli's reverie stands at the bottom of the towerblock where Zoli last saw her. Hands in the pockets of her dark dress, Conka apparently is looking for firewood, though the flat doors are all locked.

[Conka] climbed higher, going from floor to floor. It grew dark. She got to the top of the towerblock, reached into her pocket, and took out a potato candle. From the other pocket she took out a match. She fumbled awhile to light it, but finally the wick took. It sat there, flickering on the top wall of the flats. She watched it a long time and then she reached forward and pushed it off the edge and down it went, through the air, aflame. (234)

Is this an image of hope—or despair? Is Conka, like Powell's speaker in "Relapse," providing more light to aid her search for Zoli and their lost friendship, and

for those lost in the bottom of the frozen lake? Or does she, like Mrs. Caldwell, offer nothing but bitterness, or worse, resignation?

In “Chapter 174: The Fish without Scales,” Mrs. Caldwell tells her son:

(I think, Eliacim, that the fish without scales, had he been more docile, would not have found the painless, gloryless death of the suicides from high towers, those sentimental birds whose air fails them in mid-flight.) (146)

The fish without scales, my son, crackled [in the fire] like an insect numb with cold and became a colorless flame, a little, almost invisible flame. (147)

The image sounds very like a warning.

A single map plays a significant role in Cormac McCarthy’s most recent novel, *The Road*, a dark, austere story in which an unnamed man and his young son—who seem closer kin to Bunyan’s careful Christian than to Yeats’s wild Celtic heroes—travel with a grocery cart along an unknown road through post-Apocalyptic America toward the distant coast of a dead gray sea. There are rivers and lakes in *The Road*, but the land and its waters are all dead or polluted and dying, like everything else they encounter.

The harsh conditions through which *The Road* takes the man and boy are, however, far more like the Shadow World one must pass through on the way to the Bright World of Celtic mytho-religious thought than are most of the old Irish stories that survived the Christian take-over with their guts, if not their souls, intact. In McCarthy’s *Road*, the only hints of possible redemption—and they are bleak ones—lie not in any stated concept of an afterlife, but more in the man’s care for his son, his grief at his wife’s

desperate, deliberate death, his occasional reference to God or prayer and, near his own death, in his description of the internal fire he tells the boy he must now carry alone.

Whether this fire is faith, integrity, or the simple will to survive is left for us to interpret—but the map clearly is a relic, a memory of the world as it once was and will not be again, having changed, as Swann says, utterly, irrevocably, into something entirely else:

The tattered oilcompany roadmap had once been taped together but now it was just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their assembly. He [the man] sorted through the limp pages and spread out those that answered to their location.

We cross a bridge here. It looks to be about eight miles or so. This is the river. Going east. We follow the road here along the eastern slope of the mountains. These are our roads, the black lines on the map. The state roads.

Why are they the state roads?

Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.

But there's not any more states?

No.

What happened to them?

I dont know exactly. That's a good question. (36)

Farther along the road, the man and boy endure:

Long days. Open country with the ash blowing over the road. The boy sat by the fire at night with the pieces of the map across his knees. He had the names of towns and rivers by heart and he measured their progress daily.

...
 They ate more sparingly. They'd almost nothing left. The boy stood in the road holding the map. They listened but they could hear nothing. Still he could see open country to the east and the air was different. Then they came upon it from a turn in the road and they stopped and stood with the salt wind blowing in their hair where they'd lowered the hoods of their coats to listen. Out there was the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the shores of a world unheard of. (180-181)

Along the way, McCarthy's father and son encounter a man who has been struck by lightning—a figure that seems mythic in its sheer going-on despite injuries, which, the father tells his son, they have no way of helping, and must, therefore, abandon the stricken man to his fate. They also encounter a starving dog, a young boy the father declines to take along with them, a human flesh-eating road warrior he kills to stop from taking the boy. In the end, having survived together, they at last arrive at what seems the world's end. Before dying, the man tells his son he must go on alone.

'I cant go with you. You need to keep going. You dont know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again. You'll see. Just go. It's all right.' (234)

...

[The man] woke in the darkness, coughing softly. He lay listening. The boy sat by the fire wrapped in a blanket watching him. Drip of water. A fading light. Old dreams encroached upon the waking world. The dripping was in the cave. The light was a candle which the boy bore in a ringstick of beaten copper. The wax spattered on the stones. Tracks of unknown creatures in the mortified loess. In that cold corridor they had reached the point of no return which was measured from the first solely by the light they carried with them. (235-236)

...

Do you remember that little boy, Papa?

Yes, I remember him.

...I'm scared that he was lost.

I think he's all right.

But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?

Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again. (236)

The boy stays three days with his father's body, then walks out to the road, where he meets a stranger who tells him:

I think you should come with me.

Are you one of the good guys?

The man ... looked at the boy. Yeah, he said. I'm one of the good guys.

(236-238)

The man then takes the boy to the woman, who delivers the novel's homily:

She ... put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said...that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time. (241)

Now McCarthy steps back into his creation, driving his dire message home with a brief aria that might be right out of the mouth of Yeats's Wandering Aengus:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (241)

McCarthy asks much of his readers. Beyond the long, slow cadences of his language, such a contrast to his stark images of a dying, disenchanted world in which faith is the only magic, and that a slender one, he offers little hope, either finned or feathered, in return.

But Justin Cronin, the youngest of these contemporary descendents of Yeats, provides a moment of earthly transcendence sure to lift even the gloomiest heart at the end of his *The Summer Guest*. In it, Jordan has taken dying Harry out for a last session of night fishing, hoping the old man will see the year's last hatch. Harry intends to slip over

the side of the boat to drown, but is stayed by Jordan's promise to go in after him. "Then we'd both be wet and cold, and the fish would be spooked. No use wrecking our evening like that," he tells Harry (352).

Close in, the water was the color of weak tea, and just as clear; when we reached the edge, I'd know. Trout might hold on either side, and our best chance would come at nightfall or just after, when the air cooled and some fish might rise to feed on the surface.... The lake had turned a deep black-blue, the same color as the sky, and all around and above us the stars were poking through the twilight, their pinpoints of light doubled in the lake's still surface... We are adrift in the heavens, I thought.

Once again, night fell, and fell some more. It was time to head home, I knew. Harry's head lay against my chest, a ghostly halo of white, and I thought, touching his hair, what dreams are these? What last sweet dreams of life on earth?

...and then it happened; all around us, suddenly, a great swarm, as if the stars had freed themselves from gravity's pull and ascended from the waters. A hatch. And everywhere, breaking the stillness, the sound of trout rising, the bright splash of their tails as they slapped the water to feed on the insects that spun on the surface. The rods lay on the benches before us, out of reach, forgotten. It didn't matter. We floated among them. I closed my eyes and listened until the splashing faded, feeling only pure happiness that I had been there to witness it. (352-353)

Orpheus, Aengus, Cela's Mrs. Caldwell and her son Eliacim, the speaker's son in Powell's "Relapse," Harry in Cronin's *The Summer Guest*, the father and son in McCarthy's *The Road*—and a host of McCann's characters, including Zoli, Nureyev, Conor and his parents Juanita and Michael, Katie's unnamed father, Treefrog and Faraday—all are border crossers, able to move freely in and out of the realms of Lethe, though each stands to lose something essential every time s/he crosses. Conka, however, like Powell's speaker in "Relapse," is close enough to see across that dangerous border, but no matter how long she traipses "through murky gardens, a hazelwood wand in hand," she is unable to get there, unable to reach, to grasp, her heart's desire.

Following Yeats, each of these writers explores the modern myth of personal alienation, the old fear of separation from the beloved, the anguish of that separation, and the perpetual mystical quest for reunion. Each, in his or her own story, describes and succumbs to the lure of a figure—human or faery—who transforms into a fish, or otherwise fades "through the brightening air," leaving an older, sadder, perhaps wiser person to find and follow where that dazzling being has gone, "till time and times are done."

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The storyline of The Song of Wandering Aengus by W B Yeats involves myth and magic, but has a universal theme: the search for love and beauty. The Song of Wandering Aengus Videos Ireland's 100 favourite poems W B Yeats. According to legend, Aengus was from the Tuatha De Dannan – the mythical people said to have conquered Ireland after defeating the native tribes of the Fir Bolg. He was considered a god of love, youth and beauty. The Song of the Wandering Aengus was a 19th and 20th century Earth poem by William Butler Yeats. The poem describes a man going into the woods, after which he catches a fish which turns into a beautiful woman with apple blossoms in her hair. She calls his name and then vanishes, and he spends the rest of his life searching for her, his vision of perfection. Sally Archer used to recite the poem to her son, Jonathan Archer, whenever he had trouble sleeping. He thought it had a funny name. Though I am old with wandering Through hollow lands and hilly lands, I will find out where she has gone, And kiss her lips and take her hands; And walk among long dappled grass, And pluck till time and times are done, The silver apples of the moon, The golden apples of the sun. This poem is in the public domain.