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the how-ness of place

Anna Ryan

The following piece is written to attempt to address the following questions, which I posed myself *

Is there real opposition between the spatial world of sensation and experience and the world of words? Do communications occur through a tension of limits and translations?**

The photocopier’s lid falls for the third time. Losing my concentration, again, I lean back in my chair, sighing in frustration. The sudden removal of my arms, now absent from the table, causes the weighty ream of A1 drawings to lose their balance, again, and drop in loose folds to the floor. Reaching down to recover the lost drawings, my head almost collides with a pair of passing knees, the close proximity of the encounter entirely unavoidable, due to the awkward location of my small desk along the short, tight passageway from one side of the office to the other. Apologies made, I raise myself and my drawings to their original positions, and resume work on the amendments. In balance again, though still somewhat precariously, my rhythm is restored, regular clicking with the left hand, combined with apple x-ing and apple z-ing with the right resulting in speedy changes on the screen. I make progress, but with a temporary sense of comfort.

All is close to further, and imminent, collapse. The grey-painted flaking floorboards slant unevenly down towards the wall to my right. So in order to maintain a steady equilibrium and remain in front of my screen, my feet inconveniently wrap themselves around two of the wheels fanning out from the column at the base of the chair, preventing the unwelcome motion. The resultant awkward angle of ankles and shins to the almost-but-not-quite horizontal surface exerts a pressure up into my lower back, which frequently collapses from the strain of keeping this grip on the floor, while the brown leather of my shoes bears distinct scuff marks from this constant friction with the moving wheels. The gathering of muscles where my left thumb meets its hand is exhausted, receiving no upward support from the tiny, un-ergonomic transparent imac mouse, while my neck solidifies into pure tension as it struggles to hold the weight of my head in the uncomfortable, yet required, position in relation to the computer’s monitor. Suddenly, the multi-coloured lines disappear. I can only see my own reflection on the screen.

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,
The polycarbonate door beside the alcove containing the photocopier, across the narrow passage to my left, has opened and a colleague emerges, moving quickly to pick up the phone ringing on the meeting table behind me, leaving the door wide open behind him. Rotated on its centrally mounted pin, this wide door, despite its translucency, acts as shield to the glare from the direct sunlight coming through the roof-light in the adjacent room. For me to work on this day of strong sunshine interspersed with showers, the door must remain shut. With my right hand on the balanced bundle of drawings on my desk, I half-stand up and reach across with my left hand to gently push the polycarbonate shut. It closes with its particular soft and secure muffled thud, timber meeting timber. I continue to work.

Looking ahead, and slightly to my left from the short, narrow passageway in which I work, I can see over the heads of the other architects where they sit beneath the glass wall, out to the centre of the urban block, to the jumble of downpipes, rusting railings and dirty brickwork that make up the rear facades of the nearby buildings. Behind me, high above the meeting table with the technical library and the heat-emitting, buzzing server, is a small window, opened only by means of a long pole. Occasionally, on a breezy day, the fresh air coming through these windows manages to find its way to me where I sit, mid-way from each external wall. But I am enclosed at my little desk, small protruding walls nudging me into the alcove and tilting floor encouraging me towards the wall.

With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds small window, opened only by means of a long pole. Occasionally, on a breezy day, the fresh air coming through these windows manages to find its way to me where I sit, mid-way from each external wall. But I am enclosed at my little desk, small protruding walls nudging me into the alcove and tilting floor encouraging me towards the wall.

Through this high window at my back come the sounds of the street, four storeys below. Set back deeply into the thickness of the wall, even when standing on the meeting room table only the scudding clouds can ever make themselves visible. The window is a purely aural device. Here, perched high above Grafton Street, the lively bubble of the city's busiest pedestrian shopping street invades the office space, without invitation. Normal conversations from below bounce upwards on the hard surfaces, while louder yelps from the screeching hoards of excitable teenagers outside McDonalds and even louder blasts from out-of-tune string quartets hit off each other in a grinding cacophonous mix. Lodged at the level of the roof-tops of the city, this nest of architects sits just below a constant gathering of raucous seagulls, massive both in their physical size and their vocal emissions. And as the office gets busier moving further into the afternoon, the number of people sitting and walking and talking increases more and more, and the street below ups its pace and activity, and the seagulls get hungrier, and the phone keeps ringing and re-ringing, and the photocopier lid crashes back down yet again, and the fax machine bleeps itself out of yellow paper, and the ream of drawings falls once more, and the computer's coloured images melt in a blast of sunlight, and the chair twists and rolls intent on following its own course towards the wall, and...

I am in the middle of a room, far from air, a room of constant motion, of frenetic aural and physical activity, a whirling juxtaposition of work and
play, disturbing in the intensity of both. And it is all being absorbed into me. I click faster and faster, melting lines re-appearing and disappearing to the rhythm of the door, I must keep up. The business is rushing, pushing, inside I am going, I am going, I am going faster. I cannot stop. The place, the surroundings, press into me, the intensity, the durations. I tighten and tense and tighten. Legs. Thumb. Neck. I must keep on this pressure. I go faster. I must keep going. I keep going. Clicking. Faster.

I must stop.

I pull the office door behind me, click, avoiding the bang. Pushing the button, I hear the lift slowly manoeuvring its way towards me. Too slow. Through the open shaft I hear distant conversations weaving upwards from floors below. Too slow. I pull across the heavy iron gate. The lift's floor depresses slightly as it receives my weight. Then I pull back the gate and it sounds in a hurried crash. Descent. Too slow. Watching the floors slip by. Slower. I breathe. Steady speed. I slide open the gate once more, step out, and sound the crash for the fourth time. I breathe.

But the aural frenzy of the street begins to greet me, temporarily hidden behind the shiny black door. Making the ten steps across towards it, I breathe. And open it. The energy beyond blasts me at full force. Two bodies, leaning, block my exit. I tap and squeeze through, now facing the quartet beyond, now turning towards the right, now with head up, avoiding the strings of the mini-kite-flying-man, now with head down, avoiding the battling feet working their way downhill against me, now by the wall, with its curving windows, now finding a clear passage around the corner. Now on Wicklow Street. The discordant buskers ever-dimmer, relieved of the awkward route of obstacles. I breathe. Yet still more. I am a pedestrian crossing pedestrians, one dart across them. A second. And I make it to my bicycle and brush the recent shower's wet from the saddle. Coloured lines disappearing, hollering seagulls, I drop my helmet, I drop my keys. Unlock. Up.

I am moving smoothly.

Navigating through the small streets, conveniently ignoring the one-way system, my turning wheels lead me onto Nassau Street where rush hour is choking the road with 10s, 15s, and 16Bs and as the light drizzle begins to settle down, ever-rising umbrellas block up the pathways in similar fashion. Weaving my way along, I am behind a bus, beside a bus, outside a bus. Aware of a distinct pressure, I lift my head to the right to hear what I sense, the presence of a bus and its irritable driver directly to my rear. I am an obstruction. My legs pedal faster yet the bus maintains its uncomfortable proximity. Nowhere to go. Only forward. The lift's gate crashes. Keep pedalling. The photocopier's lid falls. I mount the kerb, temporarily escaping the bus, then drop back down to the road again to make use of the green light ahead. Along Lincoln Place and Westland Row and then, swinging to the right, the width of Pearse Street opens up ahead

Speech is the twin of my vision....
of me and I breathe.

Here I hold a steady pace, shifting down a few gears as the road begins to gently rise. I watch as my front wheel, meeting the surface now greasy with drizzle, spreads a small sheet of water droplets to left and right as it passes over the smoothness. My thighs register the more perceptible incline as I move uphill towards the Grand Canal Dock Bridge. I need to work harder. I push harder. The light is green, go, go. My head is down, all is motion, all is activity. Go.

Looking up, I am surprised. I see a man with a dog flying a kite on the beach. 'Freedom by the water' reads the message above him on the billboard. I feel a surge of energy. Freedom! Faster, faster, it's there for the taking, you're getting there, keep pedalling, don't stop! The road falls away from me as I career down the hill, swerving to the right past the low redbrick houses tight onto the road, veering to the left past the plastic-faced lounge-bar public house, squeezing along a curving laneway of Irishtown, and emerging to a snaking line of large cars, mostly indicating to the left. I go with them, out the approach road to the toll bridge with its ambiguous two lanes of traffic that merge and diverge without warning. This melee of business people in broad cars, pressing across the river to race homewards, mixes clumsily with the drivers of articulated trucks, keen to deposit their loads, leading to a palpable tension as the roundabout nears. A frequent flashing of lights from suddenly applied brakes adds to the distress of this enforced mingling. A bicycle in the middle. The phone keeps at its ringing. The seagulls resume their roof-light screeching. I freeze and move at once. I am across, circling the low wall. I take the third exit.

Bombarded by the bumps and lumps of the severely pot-holed road, my movements turn into a series of bounces and curves to avoid the rough-edged sunken obstacles. A dark-haired child emerges from a group of caravans gathered randomly on one side of the road and runs out in front of me towards a pile of detritus on the other side. I swerve to avoid him and take the turn to the left, further away from the shining, indicating cars, deeper into this world of high railings and badly surfaced roads. Sitting on both sides, these security fences enclose the piled-high ship containers in their reds and blues and greens as they boldly display a range of company names along their corrugated flanks. A supermarket shelf at the scale of the ocean.

The drizzle has lifted and a strange sunshine is reflecting from the dirty puddles made by the large chasms in the tarmac. The road turns soon again to the right and in front of me opens a gently undulating stretch of road, my legs moving to absorb the subtle rising and falling of its smoother surface. Looking ahead, I see the infamously striped chimneys of Poolbeg generating station sitting above a large crumbling, yet ele-
gant, red-brick ruin. Nearer and nearer towards it I move, passing the high trundling blue gantries, over a hump-backed bridge, alongside a deep dry dock. No buses, no umbrellas, no disappearing computer drawings. I can sit up, vertical on my saddle, the speeds of my movement no longer determined by necessity. Looking from this, to that, distracted by this, and that, I am now slower, now faster, passing through an unpleasant wave of smells that lingers and follows me awhile.

On reaching the long, red-brick elevation, I turn to the right, going with the road, and pass the new concrete object, the pumping station, with its large-diameter bright-green pipes. I follow the bend perpendicularly to the left again, once more becoming aware of the presence of constructed boundaries. The confinement of passage, the forward momentum of the previous stretch of undulating road falls away to my right, as the ground drops to the beach below and moves away from its enforced edge. But as I pedal and continue to pedal, the uprights of the power station's perimeter fence on my left encourage me on a steady rhythm with their unending regularity. My peripheral vision sets up this base line and measures from it, marking off my pace. My eyes turn back down to my knees, to my feet, as they push and push into the absolute flatness of the surface, bedum, bedum, bedum, whoosh...Freedom! By the water. Go faster, go, go. You can do it. I push it more. Faster, faster. The bus exerts its pressure from the rear. The right-clicking of infra-red mouses reaches fever pitch. Go. Go.

Trying to get the uprights as blurry as possible, I keep going, turning ninety degrees to the left, and then the same angle again to the right seconds afterwards. The road, setting up these grid-like motions, forces me to make a left once more. At speed. The water, gone from my right, is straight ahead, is to my right. The final stretch. It is to my right and it is straight ahead. The railings, my gauge, end abruptly on my left as I rush down the final slope ready to pull the brakes, bounce from the smooth tarmac onto the rough granite, and slow considerably as my front wheel lodges itself in a low drift of sand.

I stop.

Motion turning to temporary rest, I get off my bike and lock it to a rusting blue square-section upright. I am on the South Wall, and I start to walk. I am on a five or six metre width of platform, formed with and surfaced by roughly hewn stone blocks, that drops on my left into the Liffey, the river marking the seaward entrance to the city. On my right is a waist-high low wall retaining a small scrub of wasteland, with the sandy land stretching to the south beyond it, currently out of sight behind a series of ruined walls. Looking down to keep steady on the uneven surface, I see the puddles that are still drying as they leave an evaporation pattern over and between the granite blocks and wind-discarded sand. The change in locomotion feels strangely unusual for my legs. I think I am barely moving and yet my stride denies this. Wound up by a compressed
and solidified internal tension, this sudden transition of movement, this imposed radical change of pace, forces the speed of my recent physical and mental exertions to take their effect. I am exhausted.

Finding a no-longer damp patch, I sit on the low wall. Feeling sheltered and protected by the massing of the land and its crumbling walls behind me, I look onto the river. The water surface appears like a diaphanous material draped over a soft force, inhaling and exhaling smoothly, creating rhythmic undulations and contours above its visible depth. My eyes follow these movements, the thick curves of liquid, as they swell towards, and then along, the edge of the granite pier, a slow rising and falling along, rising and falling along, rising and falling along, rising and falling along. Soporific in their regularity and comfort, I keep watching, and allow my eyes to close. The curves continue their motions and sound gently along the stone. A piece of hair is moved effortlessly across my face by the light breeze. Pushing it away I hang my head and slouch, letting the muscles of my body get heavier and heavier and heavier. The backs of my legs touch the vertical surface of my low wall, while the water repeats its sounding on the stone a few metres distant. Head dropped towards chest, I become aware of my own rising and falling, the gentle subtleness of my own rhythm, the internal movements of my own body expressed externally. I rise and fall with the river.

Feeling wet now on my hand, now on the side of my cheek, I look up. Raindrops pepper the smoothness of the water, transforming its softness into a pincushion, each drop clearly visible in itself, the coming together of vertical liquid with horizontal liquid communicated through expanding circles of motion. As these drops and circles increase in their number and intensity, a large flock of maybe over one hundred seagulls land before me amongst them. Bouncing about from one spot to another in small flights, each gull appears as though in search for something, while the group as a whole remains subject to the continual rising and falling of their fluctuating ground. This motion gains momentum both in height and in speed as a rising wind lifts and shatters the smooth surface and a ferry approaching the mouth of the river deepens the furrows of the water's contours with it's wake. The forming wavelets, now slapping in vocal agitation against the granite wall, rise higher up its side, spraying over the recently erected concrete barriers and occasionally landing in plashes on its uneven blocks. My hair is moving quite vigorously now as the squall arrives in its fullness and the shadows from the sunny spells fade out. The screams of the gulls appear dulled by these sonic and physical activities of the tidal water, their noise no longer grating on me as it did among the rooftops of the city. Perhaps the change is in my receptiveness. No longer am I separated from sound by a small, high window, or from air by a distant wall of glass. I am within. Outside. Leaving my spot on the wall I start to walk, into the direction of the rain.

The heaviness in my arms and my legs results in a loose comfortable flowing movement without focus. Happy to be getting wet, my body feels released from the constrictive surroundings of my alcove-desk. The low wall ends, and as I approach the small service building, water now
appears visible on both sides of the pier. Passing beyond the yellow bollards the Great South Wall extends itself before me, this piece of granite engineering reaching like an arm out into Dublin Bay. So low to the water, and efficient in its width, its simplicity and restraint exudes the character of a purely functional object, direct and non-pretentious in its nature. Made up of long narrow stone blocks from the quarry across the bay, its history is marked by the fractures and fissures visible intermittently along its length. As I walk, I look from line to line, where edge of block meets edge of block, to where my feet make contact with and negotiate the varying textures and finely graduated heights of the material as it has been dislodged and jolted by two hundred years of storms and activities. I am entirely caught up in this intimate scale of detail, absorbed by this local world of slow-changing repetitions. I stumble.

Looking up as I gather my balance, I am launched into the horizon and the two parted waters. The world opens up before me, broken into clear elements. Wall, ocean, sky. I see how the path lies ahead of me. From clicking mouse and bleeping fax to here. My mind registers enormity. The billboard's Freedom! The man and his kite and his dog! Maybe I have it here! My energy levels surge from somewhere beyond my absolute exhaustion and I leap forwards. Abounding in enthusiasm, I run a little, and then do a few skips, thoroughly enjoying my outburst of pure excitement. Circling randomly backwards I catch a swiftly rotating glimpse of the port and its two heralding chimneys behind to the west and the flashing red lighthouse ahead to the east. Who cares if the drawings fall five times a day! I am here! Loving this place, this closeness to the sea, being out on this special length of engineered 'land' in the middle of the bay, in the middle of my city!

As the rain continues its breezy angled descent from the north-east, I am now quite wet, and take the opportunity of shelter among the cluster of white-painted buildings gathered half way to the lighthouse. Housing the Half Moon swimming club, these casually grouped few rooms mark, for many, a destination on the wall, a point of measurement or a place of conclusion. Facing to the south, my back to the river, I sit alone on the swimmers’ bench. The timber of this part of the bench is dry, entirely on the lee of the wall, and I find myself picking away at the flaking paint, sky blue in the city's sporting colours. Leaning against the wall, I twist my body slightly to one side, allowing the muscles of my lower back support as they press against its verticality.

Sheltered and enclosed, the excitement of the last part of my walk transposes into an inner surge of warmth and I cannot help myself from smiling about nothing in particular as I sit looking across the bay to the hazy silhouette of mountains as they reach down to meet the water's edge. From my vantage point, the city and its southern environs appear protected by these slopes as they run along its entire length. The dynamic piece of land-sea before me, cyclically transforming itself from fluid to solid, is now completely in flux, the significant swell being pushed and encouraged forward by the strengthening north-easterly, heaping up the growing waves, as they rush over themselves as though in a race towards the beach across the choppy flatness. I watch. I watch, transfixed by these watery motions repeating, repeating. Slow time.
Feeling how the shower has lifted, I see the raining darkness passing off overhead to the south, down the east coast of the country. The blurry-edged expanse of mountains sharpens its focus and details become visible on the far shore, two and more miles distant. I stretch and move on. Encouraged forward by the uncomfortable sticking of damp material to my legs, I leave the swimmers' seating place and begin walking again in the now-drying breeze. Here, at the elbow of the Great South Wall, the stone construction cranks perceptibly to the north and ramps up in level. I rise with it, now distinctly higher above the two bodies of water, further exaggerated by the currently ebbing tide. The northern side of the wall drops down into the river, vertical. To the south, on the side of the mounting waves, massive boulders are piled along the wall's length in defence of the port against the sea. The differing characters of the separated bodies of water are clearly evident. To my left lies a liquid in no hurry, channelled and controlled in its soft rolling flatness towards the wall, while away from the wall in the direction of the mountains moves a liquid in a highly worked up state, broken in its potential smoothness by erratically changing elevations. Walking this higher stretch of wall with the fast clearing sky, the previous bubbles of excitement from my running have mixed with the internal calm from my sitting, resulting in a sureness, a feeling of vigour, further emphasised by the brisk wind applying itself to my face. I feel elevated. I am elevated. Blown. Alive. Solid, stronger and less vulnerable. I am not forced into position by a sloping floor and a rolling chair. I am in control of my body. 

Now a mile and a half out along the wall into the bay, I near the red lighthouse. Glancing up to the little buddah someone has placed facing the Liffey, I move into the shadow of it's long high wall where it bounds the surrounding outbuildings. Registering the immediate quiet I enjoy this aural micro-environment, where the pressure of the fast moving air is removed by the shelter. My pace slows without the incentive of the wind, and a reflected warmth is perceptible from the stretch of wall's white render. Moving along to moving around marks the transition from wall to lighthouse. From white to red, from render to painted stone, while further around the slow heavy curve of its base, the wind reappears in its full energy. Sloping upwards and inwards towards the passing clouds, this lighthouse heralds the reaching out of the city, the point where the previously separated waters become one. With the solidness of its construction behind me, Howth Head to my north and Dalkey Hill to my south, I step up onto the low granite blocks and face the open horizon. Ahead lies the width of nothing. Or of everything. This meeting of essentials possessing its myriad of possibilities. Freedom! By the water! The marketing strategist who designed that billboard advertisement got it right. I am open to the world, tiny in this massive scale of everything or of nothing. Knowing the privilege of being here in a position somewhere between sea and land and sky, in a constructed place that might not have been.
As I turn around and walk back towards the city, occasional scattered lights begin to appear with the onset of evening. Buffeted forwards by the wind at my back, my head and my body are ready to burst with the enthusiasm afforded to me by my walk into the middle of Dublin Bay. I am full of the optimism of the elements, of stone, of light, of sky, of sea, this overwhelming place and the responses it brings into me, pushing from the inside out. Tomorrow, as I sit and click at the multi-coloured lines on my screen in my passage-way desk, the drawings will fall to the floor, and the lift's gate will crash and the quartet will bash out intolerably wrong notes, and the pressure of the intense activity will be constant around me. But my body will envision itself here, to the freedom of this location, to the ways of moving within this flatness, to the awareness of this openness. I will remain on the wall.

Notes:

The interspersed text in large italic font is an extract from Song of Myself, a poem by the American poet Walt Whitman first published in 1855.

* This piece of writing forms part of my ongoing work for a course entitled Writing Architecture - a series of workshops and seminars being held by AKAD, (The Academy for Practice Based Research in Architecture and Design) in Stockholm, Sweden between June 2004 to January 2005. I have been awarded funding by the Arts Council of Ireland to attend these sessions in Stockholm. This piece attempts to engage a major aspiration of the course - to bring together creative and critical writing in one text. I will continue to explore this aspiration to further the writing possibilities of my own thesis, Territory and Process: an exploration of perception at the meeting of land and sea, which is funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

** The issues addressed by these questions form a large thematic part of my research interests. Although it can stand on its own as a piece of work, this is intended to be an interactive piece, part of a process, not purely a finished product. Having read this personal narrative, I wish to invite readers to challenge and question both my approach and their own: to prompt the reader into full engagement with the issues, to think out their position, to consider any parallels or possible identifications, and through this active reflection, to make a response to southwall@oceanfree.net so as to assist me in my project. Thank you.