MEASURING SILENCES: INSTITUTION, BODY, AND FAMILY IN ANNEMARIE NÍ CHURREÁIN’S BLOODROOT

KAYLIN FUSSELL
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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Matthew Tierney
Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Christopher Reed
Professor of English
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.
ABSTRACT

How do we measure the silences in our lives? Our histories, our identities, our families, our bodies, and our senses of self are all deeply entrenched in a complex web of silences that function with and against us every day. Of course, silences do not always have to be so explicit. They are not always a restriction of voices or removal of rights; they are often subtle and unnoticed, sometimes for so long that they may only be uncovered when we begin to measure and investigate them.

My investigation is centered on Irish women and their histories, particularly the women and families affected by Ireland’s Mother and Baby Homes. Throughout the 20th century, the Irish State in conjunction with the Catholic Church implemented numerous Mother and Baby Homes throughout Ireland. These homes housed unmarried, pregnant women who were confined until they gave birth. In recent years, numerous reports have brought to light the horrors within these homes. One of the most discussed and investigated issues that emerged from these reports was the frequent, nonconsensual adoption of the children who were born in the Mother and Baby Homes. Mothers and children were forced to separate and as a result, familial histories have either been completely lost or irreversibly damaged. What emerged from this loss of history was three distinct forms of silences, each informing the other: institutional, bodily, and familial.

Annemarie Ní Churreáin’s poetry collection *Bloodroot* not only voices these silences and illustrates them in their raw, unfiltered light, but it recovers both the body and the family while exposing the institutions that perpetrated these silences to begin with: Irish State and the Catholic Church.
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Introduction

*Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph.*

Haile Selassie

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s account of the subaltern recognizes the “masculine-imperialist” structure that constructs the notion of the “third world woman,” a damaging, cyclical reaction-formation that stems from Freud’s use of “women as scapegoats” (Spivak, 48). She attests that “Part of our “unlearning” project is to articulate our participation in that formation…into the object of investigation,” (48). How we do this, as investigators and as objects of investigation, as Spivak suggests, is through “measuring silences” (48). Her analysis or measuring of this silence is one of performance: The Sati. In Bill Lazenbatt’s analysis of Spivak’s study, he notes that “if the subaltern can speak then the subaltern is not a subaltern any more” (187). Spivak asserts that the subaltern cannot articulate herself in any way and are not even given the means to, so to even attempt to speak is never an option. Instead, what option is left is “one of inarticulacy or silence” (187).

Silence, then, becomes a form of power just as much as its counterpart does. Measuring someone’s silence is a way to articulate their speech without asserting the dominance over them that produced their silence. My investigation and my measuring of silence relate to that of women in Ireland and how these silences are portrayed in poetry. Maria Bellville and Sara Dybris McQuaid suggest that “silence is… disempowering and inescapable and an inherent symptom of colonial discourses of power. In the Irish context, however, the colonial subject frequently speaks for itself” despite their silence (5). My measuring of silence is not to insinuate
that Irish women are part of the Subaltern studies group that has been recognized in more recent times (as opposed to times during British colonialism). Because *Bloodroot* was written in the 21st century, and the historical events I reference all occurred in the early to mid 20th century, I do not wish to perpetuate the notion that Irish women’s struggles in these periods can be equivocated to the hardships of the women that Spivak references. This is because, as Bellville and McQuaid point out, the Irish subject possesses the ability to speak, and frequently participates in acts of un-silencing through the production of poetry and other various literary mediums. However, my investigation aims to measure the different kinds of silences that are represented in Irish poetry and how those silences relate to the political and historical contexts of Ireland’s relationship to and the treatment of women.

Most of Ireland’s history is in direct opposition towards women, both church and state implementing several programs and institutions that accelerate the communal loss of identity (the Magdalene Laundries as just one example). Another institution is poetry. Take, for example, the rich poetic history of Ireland. It is difficult to discuss poetry without merely mentioning, even revering, Irish authors, but it is also common to have a conversation concerning Irish poetry without one mention of women poets. Ironically, Ireland is home to some of the greatest poets, not just women poets, of the 21st century. Ireland’s women poets are powerhouses in their field—Eavan Boland, Paula Meehan, Rita Ann Higgins, Eiléan Ní Chuilleannáin, and so many more—even though they are often left out of conversations discussing Irish poetry and its importance. But at the heart of what makes Irish women poets so great is exactly what hinders from their recognition: an underbelly of erasure and exclusion.

Two questions have been posited as I explore Irish women’s narratives: Is this exclusion a catalyst for what makes poems about women’s suffrage, colonialism, and bodily silence so
powerful? Or is it that the poems that are powerful on their own, and exclusion is merely a consequence of being a woman? It is, perhaps, the fatal tragedy of being a woman in such male-dominated fields—and while nearly every field is male-dominated, poetry has certainly been one of the frontrunners—that their work never quite sees the light of day in the way it should, or that even the most accomplished women poets will always be overshadowed by men.

It does not escape my mind that this stark separation between women and men in the poetry field exists everywhere, not just in Ireland. Ireland, however, has a distinct separation that was apparent even while I studied there in 2018. Bookstores were covered wall-to-wall with poetry collections, but individualized sections were dedicated to men. Rarely ever did I come across a section that was solely dedicated to women. Even then, and especially now, it seemed bewildering to me that such voices could be excluded so casually, and even though I had seen this sort of behavior in regards to American women novelists and poets, I reminded myself that we still had a baseline recognition of women’s names and contributions and that this baseline changed nearly everything for how we learned about the written word.

What is so special about Irish women poets, and what initially drew me towards them, is their ability to create a voice in a seemingly voiceless world. In particular, it is modern Irish women’s poetry that articulates this, and it is because Irish women’s poetry had a sudden and blooming breakthrough following a shift that is definitive of Irish history. The shift, which relies on religious, political, and gendered discourse, revolves around the experiences of the women housed in Ireland’s Mother and Baby Homes. Annemarie Ni Churreáin’s collection Bloodroot focuses on the gaps in family histories that these homes created and the attempt to reclaim lost or unknown family members. A singular commonality between these two shifts, which resulted in a myriad of silences, is that of institutions and institutional impacts.
Institutions create a number of silences that in turn produce a variety of other silences. Church and state imposing limitations, restrictions, and imprisonment efforts on women’s bodies leads to a silence surrounding corporal issues, such as reproduction, menstruation, and bodily autonomy. This corporal silence is defined by the act of written laws imposed by institutions to silence women who became pregnant out of wedlock. These laws assume women’s passivity, their willingness to be controlled, and their silence in voicing aloud their corporal independence. In the wake of this bodily silence, a type of familial silence closely follows. This familial silence is defined by the effort to break apart mothers and children in the home. As a result of the control over women’s bodies, there lingers a long and painful history of children who do not know their mothers or mothers who never met their children. Blank spaces in familial histories began to occur, and familial ties slowly became familial gaps. This silence is one of embarrassment, forgetting and re-remembering, reconnecting and speaking aloud the history that occurred and the names that were never known. In this familial embarrassment of daughters who became pregnant out of wedlock, people turned to church as a way to cope, and the church turned to women’s bodies as a way to regain power and control. Each silence is interconnected and cyclical in vicious ways.

For Annemarie Ní Churreáin, these issues are sewn deep. She writes, “Bloodroot is a book dedicated to my foremothers, in particular the women of my family whose voices were not always heard” (Churreáin, “I was raised in the shadow of men who wanted to conquer wilderness”). In displaying how women have had their voices squandered, Churreáin presents how spoken language both constructs and deconstructs identity. She makes the voice and the feminine body synonymous with each other, implying that within the restriction of language and voices, women’s bodies face the same penalties. The lack of voices within her collection is made
up in other places, whether that be in place of a touch, a piece of nature, a line break, a form break, or blank spaces. Ireland’s silences are distinct and poignant, so sharp that sometimes, even poetry does not do them justice. Voices that are foreclosed from history, or lost entirely from it, hold the same intrinsic value as gaps between lines or where the poet in speech takes a breath to pause.

*Bloodroot* is a culmination of silences and of places where sound and breath cannot expound upon the history behind them or the events that led them there. Churreáin explains, “Often, I am drawn back to moments in history scarred by a sense of wordlessness. In exploring trauma, marginalized lives, the ways in which women and children have been made vulnerable by institutions of the Irish State, silence is troubling. And yet, as a tool of poetry, silence has a special currency, a richness by which all kinds of freedom becomes accessible. To enter into a poem’s silence is to unpack and reveal new meaning, independently of marks or sound” (Churreáin, Island’s Edge Poetry). *Bloodroot* illustrates the importance of language where there is none; where people feel as if their voices can no longer be heard or no one is willing to listen to them. And when considering women’s role in history, but especially poetic history, this notion of silencing becomes vital. Bellville and McQuaid articulate that silence can function in various ways, but concerning the Irish subject, “silence… can function as a political tool in evading articulation and thereby withholding the voice, or, it can work in a cultural space where silence on important political issues can reveal more about the position of the silenced than words can ever signify” (5).

Annemarie Ní Churreáin’s *Bloodroot* enacts both of these things, and it does so in three ways that are specific to Irish women: familial or lineal silences, institutional silences, and bodily/physical silences. My investigation is an attempt to bring to the surface what was hidden
for so long in Irish history and Irish poetry: women’s narratives. In what follows, I argue that such silences, when expressed poetically, reclaim a lost form of language that is manifested through the control over Irish women’s bodies.
Chapter 1

Poetry as Protest: A Measurement of Institutional Silences

Silences in poetic form cannot be discussed without first investigating the function of Irish institutions and their consequent effects on women. Ireland possesses a myriad of institutions that are woven into the fabric of everyday life. The largest and the most influential are that of the Catholic Church and the Irish State. Where one existed, the other fed of it, and then a vicious, cyclical reaction-formation occurred. The imprisonments the Catholic Church enforced on women were often supported by the state, and vice versa. These imprisonments varied and were extensive, but perhaps the most prominent church-operated and state-sanctioned institutions were the Mother and Baby Homes. These institutions were operated by nuns and admitted women who were pregnant or had recently given birth to a child out of wedlock. The silences that these institutions implemented follow as such: women were admitted to these institutions as embarrassments to the family, often never to be seen again; records of who lived and died in these homes were never taken; families that were created in these homes were torn apart, leaving extensive gaps in familial histories; lastly, those who were complicit in these institutions enforced silence onto these women while also remaining silent (Clann Report).

James M. Smith quotes a statement from the Irish Catholic priest James F. Cassidy: “Whenever a child is born outside wedlock, so shocked is the public sense by the very unusual occurrence, that it brands with an irreparable stigma, and, to a large extent, excommunicates the woman guilty of the crime” (Smith, 208). In outlining “the ramifications for those women who violated the social and moral ideal,” Cassidy has evaded “the unmarried mother’s male partner, father to her illegitimate child” and has blatantly ignored “the social powerbrokers—church and State—that facilitated these communal responses” (Smith, 208). Institutional silence is active. It
is not the institution that is being silenced, but the institution that is silencing. In this claim, James has outlined how institutions silence not only women but those who willingly participate in silencing. Evasion is a form of silence, albeit a conscious one, and this evasion produces and enacts a form of silence onto women, their lives, and their bodies.

Institutions are inherently domineering and controlling, ascribing certain ways of life and ways of thinking onto anyone who encounters them. Institutional silences, on the other hand, are the result of what happens when we are affected by forms of institutions and no longer feel as if we have a space to exist within them. Poetry, however, is a space where silences are expressed and reclaimed. As a medium, poetry has a way to demonstrate things that would often be left unsaid, and there is great joy in uncovering poetic silences that align with institutional silences, as well. As Tillie Olsen so poignantly said:

Literary history and the present are dark with silences . . . I have had special need to learn all I could of this over the years, myself so nearly remaining mute and having to let writing die over and over again in me. These are not natural silences—what Keats called agonie ennuyeuse (the tedious agony)—that necessary time for renewal, lying fallow, gestation, in the natural cycle of creation. The silences I speak of here are unnatural: the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot. (Olsen, 6)

As Olsen points out, the silences I am measuring here are not natural. Instead, they are collected and compacted over time, harvested into the lives of Irish women and have consequently bled into other aspects of life. The unnatural silences are learned, internalized, and accepted. Poetry is where this internalized acceptance of silence later turns into rejection, and where rejection turns into acknowledgment. There is a great amount of pain in silence, but there is also a chance at reclamation. Churreáin, in acknowledging these institutions and the cyclical
silences they have foisted onto women, women’s bodies, and women’s families, manifests silences and begins to understand them on her terms, utilizing poetry as a form of protest.

This collection is chock-full of institutional silences, as nearly every poem is laced with the air of church, state, and Irish governmental control. However, Churreáin’s choice of poetic form contributes heavily to how institutional silences are displayed and then later reclaimed. The two poetic forms used—prose and free verse—were created as responses to strict, rigid forms of poetry, much like forms of institutions. The poems “Wall” and “Six Ways to Wash Your Hands” measure silence in the presence or absence of physical gaps represented on the printed page. Namely, that poetic form and line breaks are instrumental in demonstrating institutional silences that relate to the Catholic Church and the Irish State. Churreáin uses poetic form as a vehicle for protesting the control that certain institutions have had over Irish women, and she does so by employing two poetic forms that were historically invented as a way to protest institutionalized forms of power—prosaic verse and free verse.
There are four kinds of people in the world, Ms. Harper. Those who build walls. Those who protect walls. Those who breach walls. And those who tear down walls. Much of life is discovering who you are. When you find out, you also realize there are places you can no longer go, things you can no longer do, words you can no longer say.

-P.S. Baber

Poetry has been dominated by other institutions rooted in hegemony and as a result, became an institution rooted in hegemony. Irish poetry has staked its claim over the literary canon, and rightfully so, but the inclusion of men into the tradition and the exclusion of women from the tradition has produced a form of silence for many years. The great irony of poetry is that while it possesses a rich, literary history grounded in the representation and manifestation of voices, it simultaneously excludes the voices that it does not wish to hear. This exclusion echoes the efforts made by the church and state to silence women admitted to the Mother and Baby Homes, the Magdalene Laundries, and the like. So, then, with this connection made, there is one unifying factor among Irish women: poetry is a form of protest.

The prosaic verse first emerged in the 19th century and “marked a significant departure from the strict separation between the genres of prose and poetry” (Academy of American Poets). This hybridity, although it “lacks the line breaks associated with poetry, maintains a poetic quality, often utilizing techniques common to poetry, such as fragmentation, compression, repetition, and rhyme” (Academy of American Poets). Prose poems are typically fashioned in such a way that they appear as an entire block of poetry, visually protesting the line breaks that poetry often relies on, as well as interrupting the audible aspect of line breaks. The prosaic verse disrupts and outwardly objects a very important aspect of poetry: form. “Wall” is a protest of the poetic institution while acting as a substitute for Churreáin’s own protest of institutions.
As with most prose poems, “Wall” is compressed into one entire block of language. In the absence of line breaks, the poem maintains a continuous mention of walls and repeatedly describes the various forms walls can take. This continual movement inscribes a feeling of ceaseless blockages the narrator faces throughout her life. Bellville and McQuaid note that “Often victims and their surroundings are perched between the duty to remember and the duty to forget - especially when the social and political structures, which framed the damaging events, are still in existence in some shape or form” (13). The physical and metaphorical walls that the narrator encounters are the project of social and political structures situated in Ireland that are extremely pertinent and damaging. Her “victimhood” is categorized by the silences these walls produce and enforce onto her and other Irish women. She identifies and names these walls in the poem as a way to tear them down and then rebuild them on her own terms; they are physical manifestations of the obstructions in various forms of her life: in language, in bloodlines, and in self. The block of the poem is a wall in its own right, and Churreáin’s construction of the poem and this specific narrative is the reclamation of her story and voice, each wall being named, deconstructed, and then reclaimed. In this process, the narrator obtains what was once taken from her vis-à-vis forms of institutions: the ability to speak.

The first few lines of the poem recount a series of walls that are connected to both blood and body. The narrator describes: “First, [there was] a wall that contracts me out of my unfurled state” (21). She brings the reader back towards an idea of womanhood and birthing, the seeming “wall” here being her mother’s womb or cervix. The following wall echoes the first: “Next, one that divides me from my own kin” (21). The first wall described is one that is physical and once broken, connects the mother to the baby. The second wall is a metaphorical one and seemingly contradicts the first wall that was described. The first wall, which “contracts [her] out of her
unfurled state” is a connection between mother and child via the body, resulting in an intrinsic familial tie (21). This wall is immediately discounted by the “separation from [her] own kin,” enacting as a wall in the word “separation” (21). The first wall encountered is not the same as the second wall, but one implies the other. Where one is born because of a wall, one can become separated from it, as well. Familial and bodily control is intrinsically tied to institutional forms of silences, in that both political issues are impossible to remove from their institutional implications. As Spivak suggests, silences are inherently political, and every form of silence is rooted in the institutionalized forms they stem from. Familial silence, then, is absolutely rooted in the myriad of ways in which the Catholic Church and the Irish State have silences women’s bodies and as a result, have induced a familial silence. First, Churreáin portrays this silence via the metonymy of walls in referencing physical, bodily walls that only women have (the hymen or the cervix, for example).

The syntactical form of both of these sentences is nearly identical, one beginning with an introductory adjective and the other with a linking adjunct. What follows is the noun—“wall” and “that”—then the verbs and the direct objects. After that, both sentences possess a prepositional phrase and, in that phrase, a form of possession. The identical structure seemingly links the two, but it is the physical separation on the page and in the punctuation that builds a wall between them. Although two things can be closely related, walls are still able to separate them. Churreáin uses this notion as a way to showcase how walls function and how this separation reflects that of separation of family and blood.

In cataloging two forms of walls—one that bonds family and one that separates it—Churreáin begins to explore the ways in which women’s bodies were used as a tool for creating
families and then were consequently used as a punishment for that creation. Churreáín explains in an interview:

It was here [in my childhood home], in the same year that Noel Browne resigned as minister for health following the failed Mother and Child Scheme (which the Catholic Church called “anti-family”) that my grandmother was forced to relinquish her child to adoption. It is at this point in the history of the State that poetry as a form of protest began like a code to write and rewrite itself into the DNA of who I am. (Churreáín, “I was raised in the shadow of men who wanted to conquer wilderness”)

The Mother and Child Scheme was a national health legislation that offered free healthcare to mothers and their children under sixteen. It was the consequent protest from bishops that caused the Mother and Child Scheme to dismantle, for fear that young women would become privy to birth control and abortion. A letter from Secretary James Staunton to John Costello in reference to the scheme states that:

Education in regard to motherhood includes instruction in regard to sex relations, chastity, and marriage. The State has no competence to give instructions in such matters. We regard with the greatest apprehension the proposal to give to local medical officers the right to tell Catholic girls and women how they should behave in regard to this sphere of conduct at once so delicate and sacred. Gynecological care may be, and in some countries is, interpreted to include provision for birth limitation and abortion. We have no guarantee that State officials will respect Catholic principles in regard to these matters. Doctors trained in institutions in which we have no confidence may be appointed as medical officers under the proposed services, and may give gynecological care not in accordance with Catholic principles. (Salazar, 68, quoted in Connell 1968)
This imposition on young women’s bodies is just one of the forms of institutionalized silence that church and state have enacted. Another, as the narrator points out in the wall that “separates [her] from [her] own kin,” and one that is quite personal, is the separation of young, unmarried mothers and their children (21). Children who were born to young mothers and consequently put up for adoption were often housed by families in the United States. The wall that “separates [the narrator] from [her] own kin” becomes the representation of the physical distance of herself from her own family history. It is because they are unmarried, young women who have given birth that they are forced to separate their families. In the eyes of the institutions, these “fallen” women are at fault simply for becoming pregnant. The “wall” here acts as a stand-in for the blockage of familial connection and the distance that separates the two. Silencing by institutions is enforced on bodies then bleeds into families. This dynamic is formulated within just the first two lines of the poem and how they enact each other, as well.

The narrator then recounts memories of language being used against her as a form of silencing and, in reproducing these memories in the poem, recovers language for herself. She says, “There is the wall that goes up inside you the first time you’re called a slut” (21). She shifts towards how walls can not only produce physical barriers but how they can produce barriers within language, as well. The word slut is the first time the poem indicates the usage of spoken language, shown by the italics. This utterance is one that is historically targeted at women in reference to their sexual lives, which is indicative of their bodies. “Slut” acts as an utterance that incites a silence within language, but it also acts as an utterance that incites silence of the body, as well. Language is consistently used as a tool to silence as much as it is used as a tool for un-silencing. For example, Hortense Spillers notes that nicknames were given to black women to “demonstrate the powers of distortion that the dominant community seizes as its unlawful
In the naming of something, it can be claimed. In the word “slut,” several things are claimed from the narrator and taken into the possession of the dominant, namely that this utterance is a way to claim a body in identifying one attribute to it. However, similar to the way an utterance can claim something or someone, it can also be reversed and reclaimed, as the narrator does here. Reclamation of the word “slut” is a reclamation of the body, thus breaking down the wall that “goes up inside you” (21). The initial bodily claim is a result of institutions and institutionalized ways of thinking, with the church and State enacting methods that are against women and specifically women’s bodies, then those who align with people in power are entitled to behave in a similar fashion. Everything, even language, is institutional.

The next line in “Wall” produces an utterance of language that continues the narrator’s effort to reclaim her own body, but shows how irrelevant that utterance is when institutions perpetuate silences. It says, “Writer: wrong answer and you lose to the sergeant’s daughter” (21). This utterance is also an identifier in the same way “slut” was, both in italics typeface. Unlike the word slut, however, the word writer is an identifier given to the narrator by the narrator. Where slut was bodily and was prescribed by the dominant, writer is an utterance that is self-assigned and is an attempt to reclaim the body. This metaphor echoes when marginalized and oppressed people learn how to use slurs that were used against them in a positive, empowering way. In this reclamation, she obtains some form of autonomy back after being under the scrutinized gaze of men. When words act as the foundations of walls, as implied in the previous line “There is the wall that goes up inside you the first time you’re called a slut,” then the utterance of writer is an attempt to break down the wall that slut built, demonstrating that walls and institutions do have the ability to be broken down (21). However, the narrator points out that this utterance is a “wrong answer” and she “loses” as a result (21). Suddenly, the narrator’s
attempt at reclaiming herself through the utterance writer is diminished. Writer and daughter are slant rhymes here, indicating that the “you” the narrator is referring to is not quite one and not quite the other. She is almost a writer, but not quite, and she is almost a daughter, but not quite. What happens when one’s sense of self is reliant on one identifier while also being dismantled by another? This elicits a level of inadequacy. In this inadequacy, Churreáin signifies one of the ways in which words can break down an identity while simultaneously trying to rebuild it. Likewise, if the utterance of writer is losing to “the sergeant’s daughter,” then it implies that a self-ascribed identifier is not as valid as an identifier one is born with, like a daughter or a woman (21). Womanhood is impossible to remove from one’s sense of self and therefore, it is impossible to break down the walls that are built by it. It is also important to note that these identifiers are completely wrapped up in hegemonic ways of thinking and in some cases, cannot exist outside of them. The word ‘daughter,’ for example, would not be able to exist without the implication of someone mothering or fathering the daughter. Dyads like these are at the root of hegemonic thinking and are represented by the walls Churreáin creates and describes; the wall that “goes up inside you” is a representation of the split forms of identities women feel (21).

This idea of hegemonic ways of thinking wrapped up in silences perpetrated by institutions continues throughout the poem. The walls shift from internal walls to external and manifest as physical beings in the world and reach out to pull in the reader, placing them in the position of those who are silencing. Most of all, the walls described are products of years of institutionalized violence and are conditioned ways of living and being within the world.

The narrator notes that “There is the wall of grinning wet-lipped farmers that gathers around the teenage girls at the local beauty pageant show, as you, in a borrowed dress, are herded into the ring” (21). There are three divisions taking place here: old and young, male and female,
and the reader and what is being read. These divisions echo an earlier one: “There are wall boys who want in under your bra with their cold fingers and the wall girls who will teach you how to leave a bite” (21). The initial separation between boys and girls, the farmers and the teenagers, implies a division of both age and of power. The earlier division sets up the latter in introducing the wall between boys and girls. In the latter, however, boys suddenly become men, while girls remain the same. This shift is an indication that women are constantly under the dominant male gaze. In beginning with the view of the “wet-lipped farmers,” we place our male gaze onto the teenage girls, physically in our reading of the poem and in envisioning the wall the narrator describes (21). As a result, we are placing ourselves as part of that wall. Suddenly, there is no division between us and the text, even further emphasized by the use of the second-person voice. This lack of division reaches out from the page and pulls us into an institutionalized form of violence and bodily subjection with the imposition that no one is devoid of these practices. In doing so, Churreáin demonstrates the ways in which conditioned, institutional silences are learned and internalized on both sides: silencer and silenced.

However, this point of view is quickly turned when Churreáin pivots the direction of who she is trying to reach as a method of reinforcing the idea of visibility, and how a physical wall can induce silence by entrapping, enclosing, and exposing all at once. This relates to the physical structure of the wall as a representation of institutions that reinforce power. In the line: “as you, in a borrowed dress, are herded into the ring,” Churreáin directly reaches out to a “you,” the ‘you’ that was once in alignment with the wall of men (21). In changing this direction, Churreáin demonstrates the duality of walls—there is always something seen and always something to be seen. Just as easily as the reader was in the position of the gazer, they have suddenly fallen under someone’s gaze. As Michel Foucault articulates in his analysis of the panopticon:
By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions—to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide—it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.

(Foucault, 5)

Foucault’s analysis of prisoners entrapped in “so many cages, so many small theatres” reflects the girl who are “herded into the ring,” the wall in which they are enclosed acting as a trap (5, 21). And, as Foucault famously notes, visibility is a trap. Walls do not always have to be in between something; they can also form around something, not as a way to divide, but as a way to enclose and hide. This is the complexity within walls—the understanding that there is always something that is gazed at and there will always be someone gazing. With walls, power is always at play: “[She] is seen, but [she] does not see; [she] is the object of information, never a subject in communication,” insinuating that she is constantly the subject in her visibility and as a result, a level of silence is produced in the act of being visible (Foucault, 5). It is not enough to be a prisoner; in order for power to function correctly, visibility is not only required, but it is inherent. This structure, this institution, results in a hierarchy of power that is not only reinforced by the structure itself, but it is conditioned within those who are watching and those who are being watched. Foucault points out that the purpose of institutions is “to induce in the [subject] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (6). The
wall of men surrounding the girls is a physical and metaphorical structure, one that incites a level of power and control in its very construction. In addition, Churreáin’s switch to the second-person point of view concludes that visibility, or the lack thereof, is inherent within institutions. Hegemonic forms of power make up the institutions (in this instance, the men), and in this construction, something must always be watched and thus, always something being silenced (the girls).

The narrator continues, “I am sixteen by the time a fire in my chest begins to burn from the inside out” (21). Internal and external walls are at the meeting point here and become nearly indistinguishable from each other. The “fire in [her] chest” is a reflection of the built-up and internalized anger that has been festering for sixteen years (21). This burning is mirrored in the last two lines of the poem: “I am eighteen the summer I join my brothers in the building trade, laying concrete, smoothing lines of dark, wet cement. I am standing on the site early one morning with a hot sun in my eyes and a brick in my hand when a man dares to ask me: what do you know about walls?” (21). Similar to the “fire in [the] chest,” the culmination of the image of the hot sun and the concrete conjures up feelings of intense, burning fervor (21). Concrete holds heat as it builds up over time, just as the narrator has had to do her entire life. The image of burning and heat shows the internalized anger women pack away in place of silencing or saying things aloud, as they have no space for them. The “hot sun in [her] eyes” reflects the narrator’s anger, so intense she is nearly blinded from it, and this anger is only fed more when she is asked what she knows about walls (21). The question “what do you know about walls?” becomes comical, as we have seen the walls the narrator has encountered and consequently constructed as a result of the consistent barriers that were built around her (21). Even us, as readers, were pulled into the story and were spoken to several times with the second person narration, allowing us to
see and experience the myriad of walls she has encountered. The “brick in [her] hand” indicates that the narrator is now participating in the building of a new wall, a construction that has been prevalent and damaging all of her life (21).

However, in the building of the wall, she is able to take control of it. In fact, this is the only line in the poem when we see the narrator become an active agent in her own life, making things happen for herself, not letting things happen to her. Similarly, when the narrator produced the utterance writer, it is the only utterance that she speaks aloud and claims as her own. Although writer was later deconstructed, this last image of a “brick in [her] hand” is a final attempt at breaking down and rebuilding a wall—the power structures—that have surrounded her (21). As she is beginning to construct her own wall, she has a say in the level of power and visibility that will be given to her. In building a wall, she is reclaiming what was taken from her: her voice. Now, she is learning how to speak again.

“Wall” presents levels of institutionalized silences that are deconstructed and then reconstructed time and time again. They are present in the physical structure of the wall, which is important in understanding how walls function as power structures. Institutionalized silences are also visible within the act of naming things, whether one is subjected to being named or if they are naming things for themselves. Churreáin produces the ultimate form of silence in the physical form of the poem, enacting multiple layers of silence to protest the very institution that she is utilizing and rebuilding on her own terms—poetry.
In October of 2018, a report was released to the Irish public detailing the harrowing events that occurred in Mother and Baby Homes and the Magdalene Laundries throughout the 20th century. Clann, the institution responsible for the investigation, released a one-hundred-and fifty-four-page document interviewing those who were in the Mother and Baby Homes and the children who were born there. They were often “run by religious orders and sometimes by law management, where women and girls who were pregnant outside of marriage were sent to be confined and give birth to their children. Women and girls who could not pay to leave had to remain in the home for long periods: frequently two to three years or more” (Clann Report, 13). What is even more shocking is that these institutions met at the intersection of church and state, where several blind eyes were turned away from the events that occurred inside of them.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the hybrid willingness of church and state to incarcerate these women produced a unique series of silences. In particular, the Irish State has a long history of demoralizing women who gave birth outside of wedlock, denying them treatment and basic needs for their babies and themselves to survive:

From the beginning of the Irish State, becoming pregnant outside of the institution of marriage caused girls and women to become socially ostracized and legally and financially powerless. For much of the 20th century, the State did not offer support to single mothers to raise their children. The Social Welfare Act 1973 was the first piece of
legislation which entitled all unmarried mothers to maintenance allowances and children’s allowance. (Clann Report, 14)

The state’s impositions have, in turn, produced a bodily silence grounded in the denial of basic rights for women and their children. It is a silence that is made for women and women alone; a price to pay for the act of having a child out of wedlock. The women were further demoralized and ostracized by the Catholic Church, which has a strict denunciation of women who: 1. Have sex outside of marriage and 2. Have a child outside of marriage. It is intrinsic within these two institutions that the body and the family are so closely tied together, and when these “sacred” sanctions are disrupted, then silence is the only option. The Clann Report details the state’s efforts to silence these women:

It is clear that for many decades from the foundation of the Irish State in 1922 onwards, the State’s policy on “illegitimacy” involved the incarceration of thousands of women and girls who became, and who were deemed “at risk” of becoming, pregnant outside marriage and the separation of many thousands of children from their mothers including through a closed, secret, forced adoption system. Women and girls were not given the option of raising their children outside marriage due to the absence of rights and support. Witnesses who gave evidence to the Clann Project offer compelling evidence of gender and socio-economic discrimination, stigma, racism, forced adoption, illegal adoptions, arbitrary detention, forced labour, physical and psychological abuse, punishments, neglect (including medical neglect), and the deaths of infants in Mother and Baby Homes and related institutions. Evidence gathered by the Clann Project also demonstrates failures to identify, and mark the graves of, women and children who died in various
institutions, including Magdalene Laundries, Mother and Baby Homes and related institutions. (7)

All three forms of silences intersect here and form a tangled web of oppressions. The Mother and Baby Homes are the centerpieces for enacting and producing silences, but these silences did not start and end with the homes, either. They bled into the outside world, into more recent years, and led to the formation of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation in an effort to expose the happenings in these homes and how they have permanently impacted familial life.

Formed in 2015, The Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation was a response to claims that hundreds of fetal skeletons lay underneath the ground of numerous Mother and Baby Homes. The home that incited these claims was the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, where death certificates were recorded for over 800 children and infants, but no burial site was ever recorded. By the time the Clann Report was released, the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation had already begun excavations on the abandoned grounds of these homes, uncovering hundreds of fetal skeletons underneath the Tuam house. The Clann Report documented the existence of these bodies, as well as the coerced and non-consensual adoption of children out of Ireland and into the United States. In detailing these events and circumstances, The Clann Report and the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation uncovered a myriad of voices that otherwise would not have been heard.

Annemarie Ní Churreáin composes a poem dedicated to the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation as a piece of her own evidence, another account to add to the story, a retelling of one of the women in these homes through narrative voice. A half-instructional, half-free verse poem towards the end of Churreáin’s collection *Bloodroot*, “Six Ways to Wash
“Your Hands” catalogs the wrong-doings women inside the Mother and Baby Homes. This poem utilizes the physical act of cleaning as a way to evoke an image of erasure, a visual metaphor for silence. Churreáin, in crafting this form of instruction and dedicating it to the commission, reclaims the home from its original purpose of shaming women and directs it towards the nuns who worked in the homes and, in their own way, admitted themselves to silence: through the unmarked graves, the forced adoption, and in the act of utilizing church as a way to justify their actions.

This poem, like “Wall,” is a form of protest. A free verse poem—the form “employed by French symbolist poets seeking freedom from the strictures of the alexandrine”—acts as a narrative protest as much as a poetic one (Academy of American Poets). In an interview, Churreáin says: “A poem, of course, is not a placard, or a chant (and neither do I feel that the poet is in some way obliged to contribute to political or social commentary), and yet a poem is transformative by nature. It seeks to create a moment of change in the world. More than any other literary form, poetry connects the human body to the power of silence, rhythm and breath. To make a mark or a sound with your own physical self, how can that not be political?” (Island’s Edge Poetry). It is impossible to dedicate a poem to the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation without being political. Not only is the poem inherently political, but it is also a recognition and display of silences that are so deeply entrenched in a variety of political issues.

“Six Ways to Wash Your Hands” employs the most important aspect of the free verse—voice—through the use of imperative verbs, second-person point of view, and an ambiguous narrator to demonstrate an institutionalized voice producing institutionalized silences. In doing this, Churreáin displays how nondescript institutionalized silences can appear and the importance of voicing one’s experiences as a way to reclaim silences.
The first line instructs: “wet hands, apply soap and rub palm to palm / until a white lather forms like the spit and rage of women, who… / were stripped of their names to pay for the wrongs / in their bellies” (43, 1-4). The term “stripped” implies a passivity—something having been done to someone—and reflects institutional methods of control and power. There is power in being able to name something, but there is also a level of power in possessing the ability to strip something or someone of its name and identity completely. The title poem of the collection “Bloodroot” points out that these Mother and Baby Homes often gave women “house names” under which they were addressed instead of their birth names. This parallel is made here in stripping these women of one name and one ability to speak aloud and replacing it with another. Likewise, the phrase “to pay for the wrongs / in their bellies” incites a degree of separation of the narrator from the “they” being discussed (43, 4-5). This stanza, like each stanza, begins with an instructional, quasi-refrain that reflects a form of utterance that is enacted in order to silence someone. Bellville and McQuaid point out:

A key point is the way in which power can operate through silence and silencings, glossing over some positions and shouting down others. In such a context, silence is manipulation: an instrument to establish dominant discourses, to trivialise dissent, to discriminate and to disenfranchise. In its negative, oppressive form, silence can be a means of exclusion and marginalisation from which emerges a hegemonic discourse. (7) The instructional form of the poem and the repetitive imperative verb forms reflect this idea of “shouting down others” and producing a silence that is inherently dominant and destructive (7). The repeated imperatives suggest a weave of institutionalized silence that repeats ceaselessly for the women who live at the homes.
The line continues, “as they stitched lace, / pressed linen sheets, / and each week bowed their heads to the post-partum girls / all lined up at the front like a row of roots half-pulled / out of the earth and still holding onto their young” (43, 5-8). Churreáin demonstrates the irony of youth within the context of the homes, something that is normally revered and sought after, yet here, it is pitied. She parallels youth and nature, yet juxtaposes the bloodroot—deeply entrenched, rooted in the earth and one’s self—with the uprooting of children from bellies and women from their graves. This idea of being uprooted rejects Churreáin’s idea of the bloodroot, a root that connects you to earth, blood, and family. Their uprooting is two-fold: an uprooting from their bodies and their children. As they are “half-pulled / out of the earth,” they are removed from their mother (Mother Earth) fresh from the womb, still young (43, 7-8). Youth is also emphasized in the fact that they are consistently called “girls,” not women, implicating that these new mothers are just being uprooted from the earth themselves. In their uprooting, they no longer have autonomy over their bodies, which now belong to the nuns and the institution. Furthermore, because they are “still holding on to their young,” they become the root from which their children are born (43, 8). The bloodroot is now established, though it is through the body and in the act of cleansing one’s self that family will become erased, and it is through the institutionalized voice in which this is done.

The use of the second person voice begins to take form in tandem with the saturation of senses, particularly touch and smell. The sensory images paired with the use of the second person voice leads to uncertainty as to who is speaking, who is instructing, and who is truly being silenced. “Rub right palm over left dorsum and left palm over right dorsum / to ensure the scent of infant leaves your skin: the sour fumes / of bottled milk, triangle terry cloth, ice-cold smears of cream. / The scent of sin can cling for years as potent as a bad dream / of trade-deals,
needle pricks, poppies bloomed on the skull. / The scent of child in an unmarked grave may get in beneath / your fingernails and cause all sorts of problems in later life” (43, 9-15). These sensory details serve as a reminder that this body is not “yours,” as it has been tainted with the “scent of a child in an unmarked grave” (43, 10). It is not the baby here that is equated to sin, but the remanence—the scent, the touch—of a baby. In this stanza, a better idea of the narrative voice begins to come through, sounding almost like a mantra one would repeat to oneself. The “you” becomes even more ambiguous and could belong to two people: either a mother in the home or a nun working there. The mention of “trade-deals” gives us a better idea of the voice, alluding to the trafficking of babies from the homes into the United States for illegal adoption, although its brief mention and the fact that it never appears again reflects the silence that it has had in these homes and the history of it. This stanza allows for the imperative voice to shine through, offering an inclination that this voice is laced with regret, shame, and above all, guilt.

The abundance of sensory images is utilized as a way to cover up for that guilt; the sensory descriptions are vehicles for grounding the narrator in physical, tangible things that can be erased and silenced forever. The “child in the unmarked grave,” however, cannot be erased, at least not forever, and as indicated in the narrator’s fear, it can “cause all sorts of problems in later life” (43, 10).

The next lines read: “Rub palm to palm, fingers interlaced around the wrists / to erase all trace of fathers. Never mention the cuffs. / Never mention the scars. Raise your head against the sky / and let the violet clouds overfill your eyes as the names / of these men become as unknown as birds. / When you see a wing, like a realm of thumbed pages / fluttering, take this as a sign: the fathers are no more” (43, 16-23). The narrator consistently reminds us to erase and to silence, and to do so deliberately. This reminder is a method for covering up the guilt inflicted in the
second stanza, and the refrain at the beginning of each stanza echoes that guilt in the form of a prayer. Turning to religion as a way to cope is a trademark of both parties: nuns used religion as a way to justify their actions, and women turned towards religion as a way to repent, and the religious imagery surrounding hands and palms also reflects these notions. The initial rhyme of “erase” and “trace” acts as a juxtaposition; the opposite of erasing something is to track it down, to trace it. Both words harbor undercurrents of familial ties as a family and history that has been “erased” and thus, can no longer be “traced.” This reflects the earlier mention of trade-deals, wherein children are separated from their mothers and then adopted illegally out of Ireland.

Additionally, these lines are the first mention of fathers: “Rub palm to palm, fingers interlaced around the wrists / to erase all trace of fathers” (43, 16-17). The State actively ignored fatherless mothers and evaded the responsibility for them. Early pamphlets calling for the support of unmarried single mothers noted that: “the unmarried mother who keeps her child does not officially exist as a class as far as this State is concerned. It is time that she was recognised. The unmarried mother does exist. We need a system for dealing with her problems which is less punishing and more aware of her and her child as a fatherless family… Some legislation must be brought into being to ensure that the person named as the father will accept the responsibility involved. This would mean that the legal stigma of illegitimacy would be removed, and the child would have a right to his father’s name and inheritance” (Clann Report, 14). Mother and Baby Homes only kept records of the mothers and the children, never their fathers, so it is clear that there is a disconnect between the Irish State and these homes regarding who was deemed responsible or “at fault” for the child, and it is the women who are punished for it. Therefore, the narrator urges to “erase all trace of fathers,” as it is an erasure that is two-fold: an erasure of the family, and erasure of men’s responsibility (43, 17).
In addition, the significance of naming or not naming things acts as a method for erasing someone, both with the intent of forgetting them and attempting to silencing them. There is a parallel in the lines: “as the names / of these men become again unknown as birds” (43, 19-20). In the first stanza, the narrator describes the women who have been “stripped of their names to pay for the wrongs / in their bellies,” the word “stripped” inciting a level of power and control (43, 4-5). Here, the names of men become “unknown,” due to their absence (43, 20). Men being analogous to birds exhibits their lack of identity along with their allowance to leave whenever they wanted. They were nameless, thus having no name to be stripped of. The women in these homes, however, were the subject of this violence and in fact, the incitation of it. The silencing of the women inside the home is not limited to pregnant girls. It also includes the nuns who worked there and the silences they kept for years after the homes closed.

Their silence, however, is not one to be empathized with in any way. The Clann Report cites several mothers and children who were kept apart and punished for doing anything that the nuns disapproved of. One mother reports that “the nuns kept on reminding us that we had committed a mortal sin and that our shame should be eternal,” and that they wouldn’t call the mothers by their name: “‘the nuns wouldn’t call [my mother] by name, they called her a ‘fallen woman’” (Clann Report, 59). The nuns also intentionally created partitions between the mothers and their children: “‘My birth mother was allowed to see me just once a day for an hour each day after my birth when the babies were brought in to be fed. However, the babies were fed by whoever was available, not necessarily by their mothers. The mothers were actively prevented from bonding with their babies’” (Clann Report, 58). One mother explains that “she became pregnant after she was raped by a priest when she sought help after running away from a Magdalene Laundry… ‘Knowing that I had spent my entire life in institutions run by nuns, I was
asked by [the religious sisters] how I had fallen pregnant. I explained what had happened and how I had been raped by a priest … They asked me if I was sure about this and I confirmed that this was the only time I had ever been anywhere near a man. The nuns appeared to believe me but they did absolutely nothing about it’” (Clann Report, 61-62). These witness statements are layered with silences that feed off of each other, but none more shocking than the nuns’ complacency with the church and their unwillingness to speak out against such a heinous crime. Their silence, as well as the silence they inflicted on others, runs deeply throughout these homes and affects many to this day. The biblical undertones in these lines mirror the mantras and the instructions that the narrator repeats to themselves at the beginning of each stanza. Namely, that the women of the church—nuns—were in these homes inciting violence onto women and must atone for their guilt with prayer and repetition, cleansing and forgetting, silencing themselves in the act of silencing others.

The last two stanzas of the poem echo this silence in the acknowledgment of it, the inner mantra of the narrator finally revealed as a nun who is attempting to convince herself to erase any remnants of her actions: “Rotational rubbing of right thumb clasped in left palm and vice versa / to disimprint the memory of files. Wash clean the data / until days, months, years signed by clammy hands run / like slip-streams into a great shaking lake. This means / that, even should your lips part to release a holy word, / all that will spill out is a wet pulp no one understands” (44, 29-34). The sharp language used here—as displayed in hard consonants and treating womanly subjugation as a kind of “file” that can simply be erased—is similar to what the witnesses in the Clann Report claim. Here, the nun is turning the language she incites against the women in the home against herself. The line “all that will spill out is a wet pulp no one understands” mirrors the earlier witness report of the woman confessing to the nuns that a priest
raped her, and they did nothing about it (44, 34). Because the narrator cannot utter a “holy word,” she must use the instructions she has laid out at the beginning of each stanza as a way to cleanse and purify herself. Additionally, the water imagery in this stanza brings forth an image of holy water or baptism, a renewal of one’s self for the guilt and shame they feel. In her chastising of the women in the home for being “fallen,” and “ unholy” she herself has enacted the same violence. She says to herself in the last stanza to “be a sister and repeat the law like a hymn into the sink. / Do not commemorate: Do not remunerate. Do not let / the wounded woman or her child speak in a bare tongue. / Wash in this way and rid your hands of Mother, Baby, Home” (44, 34-40).

Churreáin’s slow reveal of a nun as the narrator is deliberate and multilayered in its method. When reading the witness reports, there seems to be a clear distinction between who is speaking and who is silenced: the nuns were often silencing, and the women in the homes were often silenced. Although the report does not give any statements from former nuns, it makes it clear that church officials were the ones perpetuating silence and inducing it repeatedly. “Six Ways to Wash Your Hands” provides ambiguity over whether the voice is a woman who was admitted to the home, someone who may have died there, one of the lost children, etc. Within this ambiguity, Churreáin makes certain that the line between silenced and silencer is often indistinct. When voices have been squandered in such a way for so many years, that is the inherent effect; when one forgets what it is like to speak, to be heard, and assert one’s self, then every link to their identity is nearly erased, as well. Both the nuns and the women in the homes were deeply entrenched in every aspect of it. It seems almost unavoidable, then, that the voices would become intertwined. As “Six Ways to Wash Your Hands” demonstrates, voice and assertion are vital to not only uncovering silences but reclaiming them.
Chapter 2

A Reclamation of Family Through Space and Elegy

As a successor of institutional silence, which is inflicted by years of bodily control implemented by the church, the state, and the government, familial silence is not too far behind. As mentioned previously, this dangerous and cyclical formation is a product of years of silences. As opposed to institutions and bodies, however, the family harbors an immense hold over identity and functions as a way to understand ourselves by first understanding others. Bodily identity is based on systematic conditions produced by institutions and therefore, the perception of one’s self is skewed. Family a different kind of institution from church or state. Its backbone is not reliant on these structures, but in a culture where family is intrinsically tied to these structures, like Irish culture, family is at the center of identity and sense of self and it is almost impossible to remove familial happenings from the institutions it is affected by. A family provides cultural stories about who we are and where we come from and as we grow, we learn to internalize these stories and frame our identities around them. Therefore, it is almost impossible to feel complete without knowing and understanding these histories. So, what happens when these histories are erased? What happens when the gaps in history become gaps in self, gaps in understanding? And what happens when these gaps transform into silences?

Oftentimes silences become a conditioned behavior, something that is inflicted and internalized as a way to move through the world unscathed. When institutions are ingrained in parts of life to the point where it is nearly impossible to imagine a life without those institutions, then silence becomes a way of survival. In conjunction with this survival emerges a myriad of
other silences that are specific to Irish women, and silence then becomes something that is inflicted, inherent, and damaging. Bodily silence, as we uncovered, was a product of this; familial silence is a product of that product.

Familial silence, as I address it here, refers to many years of lost histories faced in Ireland—distances in lineages, unknown branches in family trees—and how these histories do not cause such silences, but are silences in their own right. Familial silence is an issue that is at the heart of Irish women’s history (as discussed with the Clann Report) and, consequently, at the heart of Irish women’s poetry. If we think about poetry as a direct response to the world that is happening around it, then poetry written by Irish women cannot evade the issue of historical gaps brought on by institutions such as Mother and Baby Homes or the Magdalene Laundries. In fact, it is nearly impossible to investigate any facet of Irish women’s life without discovering some record of these institutions and the ways in which they incited silence. Poetry is one method for recovering a familial history.

Recently, there has been a wave of people all around the world who have a desire to understand their ancestry, mainly through DNA testing, and therefore, have a desire to understand themselves. In the Irish context, there has been a rise in Ireland to claim family members who were adopted out of Ireland and into the United States as a result of the Mother and Baby Homes. This specific reclamation of familial history is, for many Irish women poets, a reclamation of themselves, and poetry is a space where naming things and speaking them aloud becomes a primordial instinct and desire. Poetry is a vehicle for contextualizing lives and relationships that were seemingly lost in an effort to make them real again. This is especially common in poems that describe death and the passing of loved ones, or the worry of one’s own death. Shakespeare is famous for writing sonnets about living through the page even after death,
and many poets shared these sentiments. It is how elegiac form came to be and then consequently changed. Li-Young Lee and Tracy K. Smith, for example, used the elegy as a way to revive relationships with parents while, at the same time, expressing the forms of familial and parental silences they had to endure in order to produce such poems. What is distinct about these works is the use of metonymic devices to replace the absent person they are describing. In Bloodroot, Churreáin employs the same method. She describes that: “Sometime in the early 1990s a name and number scrawled on a torn paper was pinned to the noticeboard on the kitchen wall. The first name was my nickname: A-N-N-I-E. It was also the name belonged to my newly traced grandmother and overnight what I was called became a hushed word imprinted with loss and all the tricky and messy dynamics of reunion” (Churreáin, “I was raised in the shadow of men who wanted to conquer wilderness”). Here, it is a name, which is bound together by familial traces of history and blood, both of which are inescapable but become a method of silence in the form of a name: Annie. Before there was a name to a face there was the “newly traced grandmother,” a series of adjectives and stand-ins to physically replace the person who was never known. Churreáin presents this is both “Bloodroot” and “On Visiting Ellis Island,” where a word or a phrase replaces the gap—the silence—where the familial tie is broken or missing.

Though they do not use the elegiac form, “Bloodroot” and “On Visiting Ellis Island” present a distinct web of gaps and metonymies in order to recall a familial history and place into words, as a way to fill the silences, where that history was lost. Bloodroot brings a question to the forefront that does not concern living through a text as much as it is living from the text: Can familial history, can familial silences, come to life via poetry?

This section’s primary focus is on familial silence represented in both “Bloodroot” and “On Visiting Ellis Island.” I will measure these silences in two ways: through physical gaps on
the printed page, which are representative of physical and historical distance between lost family and lost history, and through the act of speaking things aloud, utilizing metonymy and synecdoche to act as stand-ins for family eradicated in history in an effort to reestablish what was lost. In these methodologies, familial silence becomes something that can be represented through poetic gaps and can, in some ways, be brought back to life through poetic verse.
Bloodroot

The poem that the collection was named after is at the heart of what familial silence entails. Churreáin explains that “the title poem references the journey [her] grandmother took in the spring of 1951 from Northern Ireland down into Co Westmeath where she gave birth to [her] father at the Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home” (Churreáin, “I was raised in the shadow of men who wanted to conquer wilderness”). In many of these homes, children were kept away from their mothers until they were old enough to go to boarding school or foster homes. More often than not the children were put up for adoption without their mother’s consent. According to the Clann Report, a great number of women deny having, at any time, given consent for the adoption of their child: “Witness 29 says that her sister’s son was taken away for adoption in America from Castlepollard using deception: ‘She was asked to dress him up for a photograph and leave him with staff for the photograph;’… Witness 5 was simply told that her daughter was ‘leaving’ St Patrick’s and was told to bring up some clothes – she was then told that her daughter was ‘not here she’s gone’ ” (30). A great many of these adoptions were for parents in the United States. The Clann Report states that “from the 1940s until the 1970s, in excess of 2,000 children were sent from Ireland to the United States for adoption,” and while this was happening, the state was well aware of this phenomenon, and in some ways even endorsed it:

The adoption of children from Ireland to the US was State-sanctioned, most notably through its facilitation of the production of passports which in turn enabled the US Embassy to provide visas for children to enter the US. The State facilitated these adoptions even prior to the introduction of legislation making adoption legal in Ireland. Indeed, the Irish-US adoptions were being facilitated by the Department of External Affairs (now Foreign Affairs) throughout the 1940s while at the same time the
Department of Justice was actively discouraging the introduction of legislation to facilitate legal adoption domestically. Thus, one arm of the State was turning a blind eye to what another arm of the State was doing, and the contemporary correspondence in the National Archives betrays an awareness of it in precisely those terms. The Department of External Affairs repeatedly told people inquiring about adoption that its only function was to process applications for passports. (Clann Report, 36-37)

When women were unaware of these adoptions, they were coerced or forced into giving up their babies. The Clann Report notes that “Ireland’s adoption system can be considered to have been generally forced in nature, such that the societal and financial pressure to sign the adoption papers was so great that many natural mothers felt they had absolutely no choice but to do so. Many natural mothers tried desperately to keep their children, but it was virtually impossible” (44). The report cites various article clippings from these women, who state that they were “not given any other options,” or because of “some pressure, [they] ultimately signed the [adoption] papers” (44). The diction used in the report implies a level of subordination or forcefulness from the homes that ultimately resulted in silencing.

Within this silencing, there are layers of lost history and lost lineages that cannot be recovered: “Because those who have been illegally adopted do not know that they are not the natural children of their adoptive parents, the true number of illegal adoptions may never be known” (Clann Report, 35). These occurrences are forms of silence on their own. Adoption without consent is a silence of both the body and the family that is divided by the institution. The Irish state turning a blind eye to the happenings within these homes is an indirect form of silencing—by not acknowledging what is occurring in the sanctions they created, the state allowed for silences to happen. Irish mothers and their adopted children have spent years in
search of each other, trying to put together a piece of history that they have lost. In addition, families whose connections are rooted in Mother and Baby Homes are beginning to trace lineages back to the homes in an effort to recover lost family members.

“Bloodroot” illustrates silences by physically showing them on the printed page, using blank spaces to represent the physical gaps between children taken away from their mothers, as well as a way to manifest the silences that exist within Irish women’s lives. In tandem with empty space, Churreáin also proposes several seemingly rhetorical or unanswered questions at the end of each stanza. These questions manifest the unknowingness thousands of families faced when trying to understand their family lineage, the unanswered questions that still linger in their lives. By producing these unanswered hypothetical questions as a form of silence, Churreáin creates a silence in the lack of an answer, the space after each question mark, as well as the space between each stanza—a form of empty, hanging air that will never be filled.

Churreáin begins “Bloodroot” by bringing to light a few names of the girls who were housed at Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home:

Behind the gates, a black awakening of trees.

Were you made to kneel here too, Mary, Josephine, Bernadette?

If I call you by your house-names will you speak?

(24, 1-3)

In uttering their names aloud, Churreáin brings these women to the forefront of our thoughts, even provoking a reader to research them, understand their stories, and acknowledge the blatant erasure of their histories. The long gap in-between the second and third lines of the poem implies that whoever she was addressing did not answer—again, empty space—and prompts the narrator to ask: “If I call you by your house-names will you speak?” (24). The girls’ “house-names” is a
representation of their time at The Mother and Baby Home, the names that they were called there as a way to strip away their real identity and histories. Names are a marker of one’s self. Stripping away a name asserts power and control. Their house-names are not signifiers of themselves, their personalities, or their intimate histories. The significance of calling someone by their birthname recognizes a person’s holistic history. One witness recollects: “I remember that it was very strange and lonely for me in Bessboro, I couldn't use my own name … or wear my own clothes,” an experience that was shared among many of the girls within these homes. (Clann Report, 57). So, stripping someone of her name is removing her from everything that makes her a person in the world. The girls “were never to speak of [their] identity or where [they] came from,” and there was “[a] rule of silence was enforced at Bessborough. We could not talk and had to whisper to each other. We were not to be heard, and if we were, we were reprimanded” (Clann Report, 57). The removal of name, identity, and speech are all present in Churreáin’s first utterance. The question requests a level of permission into the girls’ lives, one that they have never had before while living in the home. In giving something or someone a name, there is an allowance for it to materialize and exist as a recognition of the self, the idea that someone has existed, exists currently, or will exist at some point. In this instance, addressing by name acts as a way to reclaim their lives through poetry, for if they no longer exist in a worldly space, then they can exist here.

The lingering, unanswered questions reinforce a silence that is grounded in a loss of the self by the act of taking away their names. Churreáin implements the use of a refrain at the end of each stanza that calls attention to the act of speaking, and thus, the act of silencing. It reads:

Torn avenues and pillars either side, I am here for the girl
who had birds in her eyes,

If I render a wing may she speak?

Father with two red seeds in your palms,

if I show you my bones spilling out

will you show me a stone in this yard that can speak? (Churreáin, 24, 4-9)

In the latter stanza, which directly addresses “Father,” therein lies two possibilities concerning whom the narrator is referring to. Both possibilities possess ties to the church, the state, and its actions that have produced the familial silences demonstrated. The “two red seeds” could be a reference to rosary beads, lending a reading of this poem that connects this “Father” with a priest (24, 7). Not only did priests act as facilitators in the illegal adoption process, but many women also reported having been raped by priests or at least, in some way, sexually abused by them. Observers of these homes are often focused on the nuns and their involvement in these illegal proceedings, but it is equally as important to note that without priests authorizing for these homes to exist, then these silences may have not happened. This fact is even further emphasized in the intensity of the narrator’s desire to speak, her repetitive questions mirroring the uncertainty to talk, speak, or ask questions. Her fear of religious authority, one that was instilled by the nuns, is even further demonstrated here in the uncertainty of addressing the Father and asking him questions.

The “Father” could also be referring to the absent fathers of the children born in the homes. The father holding two red seeds is an image of fertilization and impregnation, showing how a woman’s life was dependent on men and their actions. This is also demonstrated in the
parallel Churreáin draws from this poem to “Six Ways to Wash Your Hands.” The stanza calls back to the imagery of the bird clouding over the nun’s eyes as she looks towards the sky: “let the violet clouds overfill your eyes as the names / of these men become again unknown as birds” (43). The “girl who had birds in her eyes” parallels “Six Ways to Wash Your Hands” as the nun looks towards the sky, erasing the memory and names of the unknown fathers (24, 7). However, the narrator is referring to one of the girls in the home who watches the bird, the father, be free while she is still on (or in) the ground. When the narrator questions “If I render a wing may she speak?” she again asks for permission into the lives of the women who are buried or who have died there (24, 6). In the production of a wing, the narrator wishes to give the girl the freedom she so longed for, and upon acquiring it, she no longer has to be silent and she can “speak.” Even still, the narrator must permission for this. While the women in the Mother and Baby Homes were silenced and needed to ask permission in order to speak or communicate in any sort of way, they were also silenced in their counterparts’ abilities to speak and be free:

The punishment for having conceived a child outside of marriage was predominantly directed at women and girls. While ARA is aware of one case where a boy was sent to an Industrial School because he and his girlfriend had conceived a child out of wedlock, generally there was no comparable institution to the Mother and Baby Home, County Home or Magdalene Laundry for the putative fathers of so-called “illegitimate” children. Until 1998, adoption law in Ireland did not address the question of an unmarried father’s consent at all. From one perspective, unmarried fathers were absolved of parental responsibility while from another perspective, and in legal terms, they were not regarded as parents at all. (Clann Report, 14-15)
The erasure of men from this narrative is insistent upon understanding that the church and state implemented these homes for the betterment of both the mother and the child. It was, primarily, about the control over women’s bodies. Men were expunged from the situation at the hands of the church and the state, which were operated by men. They are not absolved from this account; they are, in fact, a vital factor in the equation that was simply ignored. This silence is directly tied to church, state, and family. The state’s lack of action taken to provide a similar home for the men is a direct attack on women as a whole, using their bodies as vehicles for punishment. In separating the fathers from their children, as well as separating the fathers from their equal part in the creation of the child, they evade any familial consequences that may arise:

Father with two red seeds in your palms,

if I show you my bones spilling out

will you show me a stone in this yard that can speak? (Churreáin, 24, 7-9)

That familial silence is presented in the long gap between ‘palms’ and ‘if.’ These gaps are also a physical representation of the distance the state intentionally created in allowing fathers to evade punishment and remove themselves from the family structure. Likewise, the children would never know their father, creating a physical gap, a silence, within the family tree.

These gaps grow progressively larger and larger towards the end of the poem, indicating a gap in terms of physical distance, as well as a gap in family and history:

Doors if I stitch you a collar of lace all Spring

as I wait for the first-born

heat please, won’t you open and speak?

Home, if I press my lips to your ruins three times
and circle the grounds like a beast, if I say my root
to this earth
who will hear when I speak? (24, 10-16)

The refrain “speak” at the end of each stanza is followed by a question and functions in several ways. First, it invokes a sense of permission from the narrator in asking if she may speak. It also inquires who will hear when she speaks, and who is allowed to speak. In asking who is allowed to speak, the narrator omits her own right to a voice and reflects this in asking if those who are buried at Castledollard Mother and Baby Home are also allowed to speak, even though they do not have the properties to do so.

The line “if I show you my bones spilling out/ will you show me a stone in this yard that can speak?” addresses the hundreds of fetal corpses that were found underground at Castledollard Mother and Baby Home (24, 8-9). The “stone in this yard that can speak” is referring to a headstone of one of the children, and in asking this rhetorical question, the narrator further emphasizes what a lack of voice can do to someone. The narrator takes on the role of speaking for the women and children lost at the home and their histories that were lost with them. She offers her own voice in lieu of theirs, for she understands they cannot speak and were not able to even as they were alive. This is emphasized by the amount of blank and hollow space that Churreáin weaves in between words. The last stanza harbors the most space of all of them, specifically in the line “who will hear when I speak?” (24, 16). The white space functions as a method for showing the physical distance between the narrator and her own history; what is left unknown and what may never be recovered in terms of family. The children who were adopted illegally out of Ireland and trafficked into the United States experience a historical silence in their unknowingness of who they are or who they come from. The Clann
Report notes that “Irish adopted people and natural mothers are at a disadvantage in the telling of their experiences because Ireland’s closed, secret adoption system has denied them access to the language, individual records and administrative archives required to document and articulate their history” (1). At the same time, this silence was monitored and enforced, especially against the children who were adopted:

Ireland’s adoption system is opaque, discriminatory, prejudicial, and often unprofessional and obstructive. Adopted people are denied the right to know their own names and to access records pertaining to their adoptions. In addition, due to a lack of effective investigation and the absence of rights to information, mothers and other family members remain unable to discover what became of their relatives who disappeared through institutionalization and/or forced separation. (Clann Report, 8)

The white space between words also stands in as the gap not only in Irish women’s history, but in familial history as well. Earlier in the poem, the narrator begins her question by saying “if I say my root / to this earth,” and then following it with “who will hear when I speak?” (24, 14-15). The “root” the narrator is referring to is her rooted history in the women she either does or does not know within her family. The implication in speaking aloud one’s history provides agency while also admitting one’s uncertainty surrounding their roots and their life. There is solace in trying to understand, but no solid answers that are going to be given. The gaps within the narrator’s life and history cannot be made up in visiting Castlepollard Mother and Baby Home, and the reader gets a sense that the narrator knows this, as she is constantly wondering who will listen to her when she speaks if anyone will listen at all. The question “who will hear when I speak?” is important because the narrator, the lost women of the home, and the children who are buried there were never given the opportunity to speak, let alone
be heard. Gaps were made in their lives, and similar to the gaps within the poem, there is still so much that could be said.

It is not what is said that is important, however, it is about looking in between the utterances. There is where history lies and where someone gives a voice to those who never had the chance to speak. These gaps also act as stand-ins where silences did not have to occur, where they could have been mitigated or obstructed altogether. The next stanza uses the gaps in this way, creating space for intervention and for literal moments of silence, propositions created by the narrator as a plea to close these gaps and prevent these silences from ever happening. The narrator poses the question:

Doors if I stitch you a collar of lace all Spring
as I wait for the first-born
heat please, won’t you open and speak? (Churreain, 24, 10-12)

The longest gap in this stanza occurs after “first-born,” acting as a moment of silence for the children who were buried there and as a partition between the adjective “first-born” and the noun “heat” (24, 11-12). Similarly, “first-born” can stand on its own as a noun, and therefore the direct object of the verb “wait,” but the gap after the fact leads us to an understanding that something is about to follow it (24, 11). In that first moment, though, our minds are naturally inclined towards only viewing the word “first-born” and thus, we think of the children in the unmarked graves. Especially in following spring—the season of birth and fertilization—the “first-born” heat acts as a sense of solace, an attempt at forgetting the children that were born and consequently taken away (24, 11). However, despite this stanza’s tricky syntactical arrangement, the narrator is not pleading to the “first-born heat;” she is pleading to the subject of the stanza: doors (24, 11). Specifically, she is pleading to the doors to the homes that are remained shut, enclosing the
women and limiting their freedom. They are asking them to “open and speak,” as to free them, both from the home and from their grief over losing their child (24, 12). The narrator even offers to “stitch [the doors] a collar of lace” as a form of payment for letting them go (24, 10). This mode of work was common in Mother and Baby Homes, and often women were unpaid for it. The narrator uses her work as a method for release, as they do not know any other way. Because they are reprimanded for speaking, they have to use their skills as a method of a proposition, a silence imposed by the institution itself. Likewise, as the women are afraid to speak to the nuns and are shying away from it, they must resort to bargaining with the doors, as the barrier between them and the outside world is the closest thing they have. The narrator begs for them to open and speak, to tell the world of the wrongdoings that are occurring within these homes, hopeful that their silence may not last.

The gaps within this stanza signify just as much as the words do. The gap between “lace” and “all Spring” represents a jump in time of however long the narrator has been housed there and further intensifies their desire to leave (24, 10). The gap after “first-born” and before “heat” has a syntactical function, one that aims to place confusion as to what is the subject and what is the direct object within the question (24, 11-12). That same gap enacts a moment of silence for a myriad of first-borns whom we directly tie with the children born there, the physical space on the page representing three distinct things: the distance between where they are buried underground and the earth’s surface, the distance between the children and their mothers, and the imposed silence on their own histories. Lastly, the gaps after “heat” and “please” exhibit a feeling of expansion and desperation emitted by the narrator. Heat is known to make things expand. The narrator’s anticipation of the “first-born” heat—spring—is because it will expand things and make them open, thus making them known. She is waiting for the doors to open, for expand, and
for words to expand out into the public, to make known the horrors that are occurring in these houses. As well, she hopes for an expansion in order to reach her child that was taken away from her. The gaps encircling “please” produces a sense of desperation within the narrator, as if she is taking a deep breath after “heat,” and then exhaling it after “please,” in a last-ditch effort to no longer be silenced.

The last stanza exhibits the narrator’s questioning of her own voice and her own silences, not wondering whether or not she can speak, but whether or not someone will listen to her. It reads:

Home, if I press my lips to your ruins three times
and circle the grounds like a beast, if I say my root
to this earth

who will hear when I speak? (Churreáin, 24, 13-16)

Here, Churreáin presents power in two opposing forms: action and speech. The narrator makes another bargain, another proposition: “if I press my lips to your ruins three times / and circle the grounds like a beast,” and in doing so, a vision of conjuring or ritual beings to form (24, 13-14). The narrator follows this action with an act of speaking things aloud and making them materialize: “if I say my root / to this earth,” an act of speaking aloud the bond that the narrator has or had to the grounds of the home and her story there (24, 14-15). The idea of circling actually functions as a method within the poem—immediately following that line, the narrator makes a proposition concerning speaking and naming things aloud in an effort to make them real. This proposition circles back to the very first stanza of the poem, where the act of speaking things aloud brought them to life within the poem. Here, the narrator hopes this will have the same effect, but is shattered when she asks, “who will hear when I speak?” (24, 16). There is a
sense of hopelessness within this line as if the narrator already knows that no one will hear her because she is either dead and talking to air underneath the earth, or she is on earth and talking to the mass grave. This is indicated by the large gap and subsequent line break after “earth,” and the drop in the line signifies something that is beneath or below, buried even. Voices that are buried perhaps or bodies that have yet to be excavated. The gaps also act as echoes, a way of yelling or speaking into empty space knowing that no one will answer and the only voice that comes back is your own. The narrator has yet to “say my root / to this earth,” but they are considering it, and their hesitation is mirrored in the long gap before and after this proposition (24, 14-15).
Likewise, the narrator seems to have a sense of knowing that no one will answer her in the last line, as they have made several attempts to speak before in previous stanzas have made several proposals and offerings, but none have worked. She begins to wonder, as a woman and as someone trapped either in this home or on the grounds of it, who will listen to her? And, even more harrowing, is her voice worth listening to?
On Visiting Ellis Island

Modern literature is extremely personal; the narratives we either tell or recreate are intrinsically an extension of ourselves and our lives. Similarly, what we look for in poetry is what we cannot find in ourselves, or we do not know how to articulate otherwise. With those ideas in mind, it will be impossible to discuss Churreáin’s poetry without also discussing how these narratives, narratives that belong to the very subject being discussed—Irish women—reflect her life and her history. “On Visiting Ellis Island” is an articulation of that history and that desire to know. The subject of Mother and Baby Homes, gaps in familial lines, and a displacement of the family is one that is all too familiar to Churreáin. She describes:

For most of my childhood my family was on the journey of adoption reunion, seeking to trace and connect with paternal kin. Later, I shared my home with kids of the foster care system. The silence surrounding that which was literally too painful to express in words was everyday, and directly related to my ideas of domesticity, ancestry and roots. Even today, I still think of it as a violation of some mysterious code to literally ask or say too much. (Churreáin, Island’s Edge Poetry)

Poetry, for many people, but especially for Churreáin, is a domain wherein one can ask questions, one can attempt to understand one’s history, and more than that, one can resurrect the history of a person one never really knew. In this instance, it is Churreáin’s grandmother, who emigrated from Ireland to New York. “On Visiting Ellis Island” acts as a resurrection in this way, utilizing words as a stand-in for the person when the distance between the two is either physical or metaphorical. I wish to contend that “On Visiting Ellis Island” resurrects a piece of unknown history in the preservation of it through poetry. Churreáin accomplishes this in three distinct ways: using metonymy as a placeholder for the person being eulogized, utilizing nature
imagery as a vehicle for producing language, and enacting memory as a way to recreate someone.

When considering Irish women’s histories, there is often a desire to reach beyond and pull people out into words as a way to make them real again. However, silences surrounding emigrating Irish women are frequently left out of several narratives. José Carregal-Romero quotes Aidan Arrowsmith:

At the heart of the Irish emigrant experience itself there is a marked silence… This silence is particularly notable with regard to Irish women. Despite consistently outnumbering male emigrants from Ireland to England, women’s voices are absent from the texts and debates surrounding the issue. (Carregal-Romero, 131)

Churreáin does not merely resurrect her grandmother’s narrative—to resurrect it would mean that, at some point, it was told and spoken into the world—she brings it to life. Although the poem itself is not an elegy, it functions in a very similar way. The “elements of a traditional elegy mirror three stages of loss. First, there is a lament, where the speaker expresses grief and sorrow, then praise and admiration of the idealized dead, and finally consolation and solace,” all three stages reflected in “On Visiting Ellis Island” (Academy of American Poets).

The poem is split into three stanzas, each mirroring the stages that the elegy moves through. The first stanza begins with metonymy and reflects the grief of not knowing one’s history, moving through the process of grieving these histories and the people that were connected to them:

_Maiden. Unskilled. Alone._

The language I find you in is not the one you spoke,
you who taught me that to make a home is to make a sound
in the world, and be understood
for the bright, black bogs we were raised on,
heather-furred and spinning invisible gnats
high into the evening.

What is more vowel than a piece of turf drying in the sun?

(28, 1-8)

Three metonymies begin the stanza—“Maiden. Unskilled. Alone”—to describe and stand-in for the person that is missing (28, 1). Their italicization insinuates that they are spoken aloud, to or at someone, presumably the subject of the poem. Immediately follows is the line: “The language I find you in is not the one you spoke,” syntactically the “language” referring back to the previous three adjectives used to describe the woman (28, 2). Likewise, the gap after “alone” and before “the language” represents two types of gaps: a measurable distance and a state of being. The first gap is the distance between the woman emigrating and the life and family she is leaving behind, the physical distance between Ireland and New York. The placement of the gap following “alone” insinuates a feeling of loneliness, of truly being by oneself. Even more, it evokes a sense of displacement, especially when remembering that the woman is voyaging across the ocean and, if the three words are stand-ins for her, she is truly standing alone. Churreáin finds her grandmother within these three words, a language she has made for herself in order to better understand her familial history. The language Churreáin develops, as she points out, is not the one her grandmother spoke. This incites a degree of separation from Churreáin and her grandmother, a sense of knowing something about her, but
not enough, and thus she must use *maiden, unskilled, and alone* in order to place her into the world.

The next line emphasizes this longing to place distant family into the world, as she says that she was taught that “to make a home is to make a sound in the world, and be understood,” indicating that one’s understanding of one’s life and their history is rooted in sound, language, and voice, all of which are inextricably tied to identity (28, 3). In being taught this, Churreáin bonds with her grandmother in understanding her own silence and how it functions. By making “a sound in the world,” she can break her own silence in the act of understanding it (28, 3-4). She does this in crafting the poem and recognizing the familial silences and gaps in her life. The “home” that she creates is the home that she did not have previously, a home that is indicative of knowing, understanding, and connecting with family histories (28, 3). Churreáin describes a vision of the home she is familiar with, in recalling the “bright, black bogs we were raised on” and the “heather-furred” and “spinning invisible gnats,” a home that is reliant on nature and using nature as a vehicle to bonding and understanding one another (28, 5-7). Nature cannot make up for a lost history but it can hold a kind of history where we can begin to understand ourselves and our lost families.

Nature harbors an important role throughout “On Visiting Ellis Island,” as it is often the catalyst for both producing and recovering silences in Churreáin’s life. Moving through the first phase of the elegy, Churreáin displays how nature voices a recognition of loss that she could never vocalize. She describes that “Silence as a form of lament was all around me in that landscape. From the boglands I learned a great sensitivity for the hiddenness of things, for what might be buried in the dark” (Island’s Edge Poetry). Nature has a sense of fluidity to it, and she demonstrates this in the last line of the first stanza: “What is more vowel than a piece of turf
drying in the sun?” (28, 8). A vowel sound has no audible friction although the vocal cords rub
together and vibrate. Thus, nature and a “piece of turf drying in the sun” harbors a meaning that
is connected to this longing for knowing one’s roots (28, 1). Despite its superficial simplicity,
nature, much like a vowel, has a deeper layer of friction underneath. There is darkness and
unknowingness, as Churreáin describes, and this unknowingness is the lost history. In
resurrecting her history through metonymy and attempting to understand her sense of home
through nature, she begins this process and moves through the first stage of the elegy: lament and
recognition of loss.

The second stanza moves into the second stage of the elegy, the praise and admiration for
what was lost and the memories that are tied to it. However, because this is a lost history and the
narrator must visualize a version of her grandmother in her head, these scenes are idealized in an
attempt to provide a history that never quite was. In doing so, Churreáin presents the importance
of language in reclaiming family. She describes: “I do not think of you as servant in a high
collar, long hem,” referencing the garments that the women housed in Mother and Baby Homes
had to wear, or in reference to the services she has to perform in the home (28, 12). In its place,
the narrator says: “I think of you as bed-dressed and holding me / against a dream, mothering me
back towards the bone / again” (13-15). The narrator attempts to conjure a familial image of
being cradled by her grandmother as a child. Her sense of idealization has to be fabricated in
order to produce and resurrect her familial ties. She imagines her grandmother back in Ireland, in
a place and location where she could possibly know and grow up with her. The metonymies in
these lines—“servant,” “bed-dressed,” and “mothering”—are all visions the narrator must curate
in order to resurrect and idealize the family that she never had. Churreáin is forced to “dream” of
her, another indication that this knowingness may never come into fruition. The lack of spatial
gaps in this stanza also indicates an attempt to close the gaps that exist within her life. Churreáin, in recognizing and admiring what has been lost through dream and projection, moves the poem through the second stage of the elegy and demonstrates how poetry can, at once, soothe our longingness to know while also showing us what we miss.

The third stanza catalogs the gaps and spaces in history in the final stage of the elegy: consolation and solace. The stark difference between the third and second stanza lies in the fact that gaps are suddenly prevalent, indicating Churreáin’s acceptance of absences. She acknowledges her split between idealization and reality and the confliction she feels between them, wondering how she can bring back to life what was taken or lost:

In these divided states, I dream you at the end of your life,

in the peach room with the peach blinds,

upright in a hard-backed chair

like an ivy that won’t take hold

like a woman mugged of her own name

like an empty boat

all day tapping the table-tray, having lost your tongue,

having realised that to lose a home is to wake somewhere

on the ocean

knowing no cut of earth

and without a spade for the darkness. (29, 16-26)

The narrator recognizes that she is in a place of “divided states,” and this recognition is also one of separation between family, between history, and between location (29, 16). In each stanza
before, the narrator has envisioned her grandmother in some part of her life, either fabricated or a recollection of a memory. In the first stanza, she notes that she “found” her, and in the second stanza she “thinks” of her. In this stanza, she “dreams” her. Dreams, of course, are often the separation between worlds, the blurred line between what is real and what is not. The narrator does not wish to envision her familial history as it really was—a culmination of grief and loss—but she does not wish to completely idealize it, either. Instead, she comes to a place of peace and solace, settling on a dream. The gap after “I dream you” and before “at the end of your life” is her entering into this state, the place where she comes out of reality but uses pieces of it to create a sense of solace (29, 16). This last stanza defines what it means to lose a home, both physically and in language, along with losing one’s identity.

Similar to how the poem began, the poem ends with three identifying utterances. However, Churreáin abandons using metonymies and uses similes, indicating the poem’s movement throughout the stages of the elegy. Now using similes, Churreáin demonstrates the absence of her grandmother and her coming to terms with that absence: “like an ivy that won’t take hold / like a woman mugged of her own name / like an empty boat,” each defining the narrator’s grandmother in their own way, in her own language (29, 19-21). She no longer uses metonymies to describe a version of a person she knew or thought she knew; instead, she uses similes as a comparison; something that almost is, but not quite, fully one thing or another, again reflecting back to an in-between state. All three of the similes are used to describe the three adjectives used at the beginning of the poem, even reflecting them. An “ivy that won’t take hold” evokes a sense of resilience or resistance, and a “maiden” is usually in reference to an unmarried woman (29, 19). The phrase “Like a woman mugged of her own name” is a reflection on the women in Mother and Baby Homes who had to use their house-names (20). Likewise, they were
often berated and reproached, and “unskilled” echoes this notion (1). Lastly, “like an empty boat” reflects the descriptor “alone,” and how she had to make the journey to New York and, while at the end of her life, she is also alone (21). These similes function almost different forms of metonymy, but not quite; they teeter on the edge of demonstrating one thing while describing the other, in that, the adjectives used at the beginning of the poem act as substitutes for a person, whereas here, similes are used as a way of comparing that person to something else. As a result, there is a sense of detachment from the person and in the ability to name things. In using figurative language as a way to stand in for someone, Churreáin reclaims a piece of language in her very absence of using certain aspects of figurative language. This absence is the Churreáin’s acceptance of what she does not know and may never know.

The poem completes the elegiac stages in tying together the references to home in the first and last stanzas. The line “to make a home is to make a sound / in the world” in the first stanza has changed its meaning, now implying that in losing her name and her tongue, the narrator’s grandmother no longer has the ability to speak, therefore losing the ability to make sounds within the world (3). If, as the beginning of the poem suggests, “to make a home is to make a sound / in the world,” then the loss of one’s tongue is the loss of the ability to conjure a sense of home. In losing her capacity for making a home through sounds, she now realizes that “to lose a home is to wake somewhere / on the ocean / knowing no cut of earth / and without a spade for the darkness” (30, 23-26). The word “spade” here can mean a tool used to cut out a piece of the earth, as if the grandmother was taking a piece of Ireland, and thus her life, with her. It can also mean “to call things by their real names, without any euphemism or mincing of matters” (OED). In using this definition, the grandmother has truly lost her capacity for speech, sound-making, and utterances that could “make a home” as the beginning of the poem describes.
Without a name, a spade, or an ability to call things by their name and make them materialize in the world, she has nothing. The narrator’s dream of her grandmother at the end of her life is an acceptance of this loss, both tongue and home. The only place where narratives can be produced and stories can last forever once they’re told is through poetry and in writing these moments down. Whether idealized or not, the narrator is able to uncover a series of silences that provide her with a sense of self and an understanding of her own silences, of her home.
Chapter 3 Conclusion

On my third day in Allihies, Ireland, after four and a half weeks of trekking across the country and being thrust from town to town, university to university, and homestay to homestay, I finally felt as peace with where I was, both in location and in my growing knowledge of Irish literature, art, and history. It was as if I was growing into the landscape and into the lifestyle in the same way that one grows into a piece of clothing that was once too large.

Allihies was our second to last stop in our study abroad, but it was our last new location. The following week we were scheduled to return to Dublin and promptly fly back to the United States. This fact, coupled with my ever-growing desire to stay in Ireland, made Allihies seem, at once, melancholic and magical. I remember arriving, facing the distant mountains that nestled closely to the rough ocean, breathing in the sea air and staring up a long, winding street that never seemed to end, and having to gently remind myself that I would miss this place when I left it. We were told that Allihies is home to many artists and it did not escape me as to why this is true; there is undoubtedly something about Allihies that draws people towards it, especially those who are adept at any kind of literature and art. It was a landscape built for poems to be written about it and for paintings to mirror it.

Three days into our stay in Allihies, we were informed that our lesson for that morning would be a visit from a poet whose first collection had already gained notable recognition. I had no inclination that this writer would be nothing short of spectacular. However, it was safe to say that at this point in the study abroad, some of us were beginning to crave something different. I could not speak for the others and what they wanted the most, but all I longed for was fresher poetry. After all, that’s what I had come to study and what I was most excited about.
While I enjoyed reading Joyce, Heaney, Yeats, and the like, their work did not strike me the way I knew poetry could; the way I had felt it with other poets. So, while in Ireland, I knew that there had to be voices that I hadn’t, and perhaps many others hadn’t, heard. I began to feel a connection with poetry written around the people and the landscape, the rich history that was quilted into every thread of the country. I found that what I enjoyed reading belonged to a string of women writers, who posited poems and short stories that crossed a variety of subject matters, while at the same time remaining completely and wholly central to Ireland.

These poems addressed things that I had been blissfully, ignorantly unaware of: they discussed the Irish Eighth Amendment that was repealed right before we arrived, which states that abortions were not legal in the Republic of Ireland. Even in life-threatening circumstances, women would have to retreat to England or elsewhere in order to receive an abortion. These poems discussed the history of Ireland and the long-standing opposition towards women and women’s issues; they discussed how women artists and poets were the cornerstones for women’s movements and that without them, the reclamation of these issues would have never occurred. These poems and stories spoke to me in ways that allowed me to feel more connected to the country and its history. In reading these poems, the recognition of my luck had somehow slipped past me. Poems had never made me truly upset until then, and because they upset me, I knew that they mattered. And I did not know on that day that I was about to meet the poet whose writings would be the centerpiece for this thesis, for they spoke to me like nothing ever had before.

My homestay was roughly twenty minutes away on foot from our schoolhouse. Even on the hottest of mornings, I always savored my walk. The town itself was central to one main road that ran straight down the island and into the next town. In the dead center of the town sat two
pubs nestled closely together, one of which adorned a giant purple, blue, and pink mural of a lighthouse off the Allihies coast. It was a town that took pride in itself and its people, specifically their artists.

I crossed the street and walked up the steps to enter the schoolhouse, which was an adorable cottage-style building that overlooked the ocean, the hills, and the small camper site where visitors parked their RVs for the weekend. Inside, the building was mainly stone and heating was non-existent. For any other time of the year, it would have been horrible. However, given our sudden heatwave, it was a blessing. I entered the silent building and spotted one of my classmates, Brian.

“Are you ready for the day?” he asked.

“I am, actually,” I replied. I had spent hours reading the poems the night before and they stuck in my mind, her words echoing in my head over and over. *To make a home is to make a sound in the world*...

“What did you think of the poems?”

“I loved them,” I said earnestly. “I love the way she writes.” It was an understatement.

“Me too. They’re really different from the material we’ve read so far.”

We moved our way through the entrance of the schoolhouse and into the back where the classroom was. As we continued to discuss the poems, I spotted someone at the hutch making herself a cup of coffee. She had on a long black dress that blended perfectly into her hair. She adorned deep red lipstick and I observed a mark of it on the edge of her coffee cup.

She noticed Brian and me and smiled before walking into the classroom. I heard Brian’s and the woman’s voices talking softly. I had listened to several lectures from poets at that point to conclude that she was a poet simply from her manner of speech. Poets always speak lyrically,
probably without meaning to, but it seems as if every sound has a purpose and function. Every breath brings to life their vision and language; Annemarie was no exception.

I entered the classroom and saw her standing at the front while Brian sat on the sofa towards the rear. She was holding a small, navy book that had sticky notes poking out from every inch. There were so many it looked as if the pages were branching out of the book and into the room, like wild vines on a wall. Suddenly my notes felt completely inferior. Although I had absorbed the poems, I often never take notes on them. Most of my findings come from discussion and discovery, and I completely wanted to take advantage of the fact that she was there with us to answer what I wanted to know.

“How are you two liking Allihies?” she asked.

“We love it,” Brian said.

I nodded. “Everyone here is so hospitable.”

“Yes,” she replied. “Hospitality is important in Ireland. I imagine your group feels a wee bit out of place, though.”

It impressed me how she managed to squeeze “wee bit” so effortlessly into a conversation and still make it sound elegant.
“Not really,” Brian said, sipping his coffee. “Everyone knows we’re American, but I think they’re used to students staying here.”

She nodded. “People in Ireland hold education to high regard. I’m sure the families here are more than happy to have you around.”

“They are,” I laughed. “My house mom feeds us constantly. Yours too, Brian.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “We have no shortage of meals at my house.”

Annemarie laughed. “Must be a nice change from all of the meals you have to eat in college.”

My nervousness around her dissolved slowly as we talked to her. There really is something about poets that is incredibly grounded—you develop a sense that they have seen the world and its many facets but still see the beauty in it. I tried to look at life that way, too, and the longer we spoke to Annemarie, the more I saw her poetry hang in the air, the words on the page manifesting themselves into everyday conversation. I couldn’t wait to talk to her about them.

We continued to chat with Annemarie while the rest of the students arrived. Our professor, Janet, strolled in right as class was scheduled to begin.

“Oh, great, she’s already here!” Janet exclaimed. She hugged Annemarie and helped her set up while the rest of us conversed.

My friend, Gillian, sat on the sofa next to me and leaned in. “She looks like a fairy goddess.”

“I know,” I said. “Brian and I have been chatting with her for a few minutes.”

My roommate, Caroline, chimed in. “I like her poems a lot. These are probably the only ones I’ve read so far that I didn’t feel like I was forcing myself to read.”
“For real,” Gillian said. “I hardly even like poetry and I loved these.” Gillian was studying neuroscience, but she had a deep appreciation for artistry when she saw it.

It seemed as if the group fell into a consensus over a deep appreciation for Annemarie’s poetry. It truly was something different than anything we had encountered before, certainly something I had yet to encounter in all my years of study. I waited in anticipation for her to read through them, to hear them aloud, to experience the poems as poetry should be experienced—through sound, through language. Even with so much noise around me, I was tired of the silence. I wanted her to say her piece.

“Hello, all,” Annemarie began, and the room grew quiet. “It’s so nice to be here today, I am incredibly honored and humbled that you all are willing to have me. I know you’ve sat through a lot of readings and a lot of speakers, but I promise I won’t be that bad.” She gave us an earnest smile and we returned it, slightly amused at her unknowingness of how much we all loved her writing. “I would like to begin by sharing a little bit about Bloodroot.”

She glanced down at the navy book in her hands. She smoothed her hands over it. “It’s my first collection, so that’s exciting. I wrote this collection from my experiences as a woman, as a woman living in Ireland, and as a woman whose identity has been primarily shaped by a life ruled by men. It’s a book dedicated to my foremothers and the women whose voices were controlled or shut out completely. I like to think that poetry is about not only language but also about control. Ireland has a rich history embedded in language and control, but this has not affected anyone like it has affected the women.

“For many years, women who became pregnant out of wedlock were sent to institutions called Mother and Baby Homes. There, they were often forced to give up their child without consent. Many of these children were illegally trafficked into the United States and never knew
the life they once had. As you imagine, hundreds of histories have been lost. My grandmother was in one of these homes, and my father was one of the children. I grew up not understanding my history or my sense of self. My only way of speaking things aloud into the world was poetry and writing. This book gives voices to women. I wanted to let women, even if only slightly, be heard in some way. And this is how I did it.”

After her reading, she laid out copies of her book and told us that if we wanted to buy one, we could. I asked her to sign my book, and she did. During her reading, she mentioned that one of her main influences was Sylvia Plath, whom she modeled a lot of her poetry after. I felt my heart lurch when she said this.

“I love Sylvia Plath,” I offered, as she scribbled a note in the front of my book. “She’s my favorite poet.” I saw her smile and she closed the book.

“Beware. / Beware. / Out of ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.” She said and handed the book back to me.

When I arrived at my homestay that night, I read her collection from front to back upwards of twenty times. There was something inside of me that clicked and shifted into place, the way the edges of a puzzle piece finally merge together after moments of rotation. Her collection voiced something in me that I had yet to uncover, something that I am still wrestling with and peeling back layer by layer as I chose this collection as my primary text, discovering why I saw myself in this collection as much as I longed to see myself in my own life.

It was not the first time a piece of literature had resonated with me in that way. It was, however, the first time I was able to connect my own life’s experiences with that of someone I did not know, someone whose history was completely different than my own but somehow had managed to write into words what I had, for so long, yearned to articulate for myself.
I have known, via oral telling and a scattering of various DNA tests, that my mother’s side of my family has a Native American history. According to my mother, my great-great-grandmother grew up on a reservation and was full-blooded Cherokee. Her daughter, Dora Belle, was also Cherokee but never knew her mother, who did not have a birth or death certificate. Dora’s father died when she was twelve, leaving her alone. She met her husband Charlie when she was thirteen, and they divorced and remarried six times. She died in 1982 when my mom was sixteen.

A gynocentric culture, Cherokee heritage was a large facet of my mother’s and her sisters’ lives. Her father’s mother, also part Cherokee, came to live with them for a time, but they do not have much history on her. They called my great-grandmother Dora “crazy” and “eccentric,” a powerful woman who exuded grit and strength, a woman who Western culture and patriarchal implications had yet to touch—she once tried to slit her husband’s throat because she believed he wasn’t being a good enough spouse—and for that, I always admired her despite never knowing her.

It was implied, however, that she was somewhat of a burden; my mother’s family tried to distance themselves from her in any way they could, partially due to her harsh and eclectic nature, but also, I think, out of embarrassment.

But my mother and her family could not hide the resemblance that is rooted in their blood. I see it in my grandmother, past her hair that she has dyed platinum blonde and cut up to the nape of her neck. I see it in my mom, in her high cheekbones, her eyes and her hair (naturally a dark brown that she has lightened), and entrenched in her tan skin that never fades.

While I harbor some aspects of my mother and her history, her sharp, beautiful features are not things I inherited. I am too much of my father and his European softness. I am diluted
and dampened down, like a watercolor painting where all of the edges blur out and fade away. If I put myself by my mother’s side it is unmistakable but alone, I am an echo of what once was. I am so removed from my great-grandmother that all saturation of her has been thinned out in me; I am merely laced with the air of her.

_These are my hands / My knees. / I may be skin and bone, / Nevertheless, I am the same identical woman._

I was never told about my mother’s history and her side of my family until I asked about it when I was assigned a family tree project in seventh grade. She told me, reluctantly, and I never asked again.

“I don’t really know anything about it. We don’t even have the records,” she said, waving it off with an air of neglect. “We wouldn’t be able to prove it anyway.”

There are some things I demanded to know, and some of them my mother would give to me in tiny bits scattered throughout the years, like feeding a toddler slowly because she was afraid that I would choke. It was never enough for me to know that I had roots in that culture. I needed stories and experiences. I wanted to hear everything, just so I could begin to understand why I never knew a large part of my family or why they were sheltered away for so long. Whenever I got to hear pieces of Dora, it was like hearing a myth retold.

I have one particular fact about Dora that I love. She thoroughly believed that she was a witch or was, at least in some way, clairvoyant. She spent her time reading tarot cards and peoples’ palms. Her days consisted of rubbing her palm to other palms, analyzing lines: head, heart, and life. My grandma said that when she was a kid, people came from across the state to have Dora tell them their fortune. These practices were never performed in Cherokee culture, at least not to my knowledge, but Dora found a calling in them. She claimed to have “feelings”
about certain things—a sixth sense in a way—a feeling far beyond a gut intuition. I sometimes feel these, too, although not strong enough to claim myself in the way that Dora could. After my grandma and mother told me this, I was left astonished.

“Maybe I’m a witch,” I joked to them, although I am unsure why. I think somewhere in my mind, I said it in an attempt to feel connected to her, thinking that if maybe I said it aloud, it would become true.

“That’s not funny,” my mom quipped. “Don’t ever say that.”

She spoke with the air of church on her breath, and it did not take me long to understand why they did not accept Dora’s witch practices. My mother’s family is extremely religious and has been for as long as anyone can remember. My mother, Christian in her ideologies and methods, always diverted me from any discussion of the occult, the supernatural, and other-world beings, all of which I harbored a natural fascination with.

“Everything we need to know is above us and below us,” she would say. “Heaven, Hell, and Earth. That’s all.”

My extensive interest in clairvoyant practices, supernatural occurrences, and my outright rejection of certain aspects of religion made her see more of Dora in me. I think now that she turned to church as a way to cope with her past as well as a way to mold her future, a method for erasing history in the act of not acknowledging it at all. And in her insistence of forcing church onto me, I turned to my unknown past and the practices that Dora seemed to partake in.

My unknowingness about my past is a primary reason for why my mother and I divert so much in everything we do. She has made a point to distance herself, even erase part of herself, in an attempt to preserve what she has now. I, however, have made a point to bathe myself in the past. For as long as I’ve been inquiring about my history, I’ve learned to be quite nostalgic. I
hoard pictures, notes, trinkets, souvenirs, letters, jewelry, anything I can get my hands on that I think will have some nostalgic value later. My mother is obsessed with purging and minimalism at all costs. Every time I come home for break, she demands that we rid my room of at least 30 items, although it ends up being more than that. I, however, come home with more items that I would like to stash away and keep forever.

It even seems coincidental that while I was in high school, my mom suffered a traumatic brain injury that permanently damaged her memory. She lost about two years’ worth of memory and relies on me to help her recollect, although when I try, she doesn’t want to remember. It seems as if fate had a hand in aiding her forgetting processing, something she had tried to do for so long. Fate also issued me the permanent role of being her memory supplier, as I am the only one in my family who is that obsessed with the past and more importantly, the only one who has bothered to try remembering it. As I had been trying to clutch onto the past for so long, it became a form of punishment for me. In attempting to remind my mother of certain things, I constantly had to relive the process of coming to terms with the fact that I have never, and never will, know a large part of my ancestral history.

The past became a point of disconnect between the two of us. Consequently, I tried to understand myself without the help of my family.

I buried myself into novels as another research method. Most of my childhood and adolescence consisted of my nose being stuck in a book. This happened for several reasons, but the most prominent one is that I did not feel as if I belonged anywhere in the outside world. I looked for characters who were just as lost and incomplete as I was. I was introduced to canonical narratives, mostly of men, and mostly tales of adventure. Though I enjoyed them, they
did not belong to me; they were not mine. In all of the books I read throughout those years, I
never found what I was looking for: Cherokee narratives.

Paula Gunn Allen notes that “literature is one facet of a culture” and the “significance of
a literature can be best understood in terms of the culture from which it springs, and the purpose
of literature is clear only when the reader understands and accepts the assumptions on which the
literature is based” (Allen, 54). In American Indian peoples, “ceremonial literature serves to
redirect private emotion and integrate the energy generated by emotion within a cosmic
framework. The artistry of the tribes is married to the essence of language itself, for through
language one can share one’s singular being with that of the community and know within oneself
the communal knowledge of the tribe” (Allen, 55).

It wasn’t until college when I was exposed to narratives from Native American authors
and began to learn about the oral traditions that my family never knew or, if they knew, never
bothered to share with me. But, in reading them, and as Allen contends, I understood that these
narratives, these voices, were not my own. While I spent years in search of indigenous narratives
that I could find familiarity in, once I found them, I realized that I was not part of those
narratives, at least not to the full extent.

I was more like half of a person in that regard; a majority of that history in my life had
been wiped out and what was left was bathed in shame. I knew that the literature I was looking
for was not something that I could understand or even begin to appreciate because I was not fully
there. How could I align myself with narratives that only felt half-true to me, that only part of
myself understood? How could I, as someone who had always identified with whiteness and
grew up with those privileges, seek out literature in an attempt to better “understand” myself? In
a lot of ways, I felt guilty for even trying.
My identities split the more I tried to find my voice within texts, primarily because I knew they were never, and could never, be my own. I consistently had to remind myself that I was situated on land that is the formation of one of my identities and the eradication of the other, and while I was two halves in a whole, I constantly felt incomplete. I did not understand my place within the world; whether I enact as a white woman and understand the racism that exists and attempt to alleviate it, or I try to align myself with a heritage I never knew but feel a deep connection for.

Literature became something I despised. I thought that if I could not find myself in words, then where could I turn? What once was my safe haven and escape felt more like a cage. I could not identify with the white men who went on adventures. I could not identify with the English women who fell in love. I could not identify with the Cherokee myths I studied or the poems I found. I was truly voiceless. I felt silenced.

My silence seemed to only progress from there. While in college, I discovered some things that led me to question a lot of what I thought I knew. No one ever told me, and probably never thought to tell me, that I was the first girl on either side of my family to go to college. After discovering that, I realized how isolated I was. I grew up in a male-dominated family; I have two older brothers and the only cousins I know of are 1. On my dad’s side and 2. All boys. From what I know, no women on my mom’s side of the family went to college. I’ve always felt singled out, but after my mother’s memory loss, my numerous efforts to try to salvage a sense of identity, and my subsequent disappointment in trying to discover myself in the one place I always found solace in, I couldn’t help but feel loneliness ache in my bones.

That is, until I re-read *The Bell Jar*. It was, truly, the last place I expected to turn to in terms of literary comfort. It was not the narrative I had been seeking out for years, nor was it a
narrative I wanted to align with. Despite those hurdles, in my time of true crisis identity, of being stuck between intersections of myself, my identity, and my passions, I turned to Plath. *The Bell Jar* seemed like an odd choice for me to turn, though as I look back on it, perhaps not. Esther seemed as familiar to me as I was to myself; no, I was not a model in ‘60s New York and no, I did not spiral into a serious bout of depression, but Plath’s exhibition of an incomplete, lonely woman was exactly what I needed. I began to latch onto everything Plath had to offer. Her poetry is what drove me to continue to study literature; her words are what gave me completeness. It was here that I realized that the lessons I took away from indigenous literature came into fruition: although this narrative did not holistically match my own, I could uncover parts of it that still rang true for me. I am not Esther completely, but parts of me are. I am not completely Cherokee, but part of me is. I wanted to understand myself through literature, so what was stopping me?

With this new mindset, I began reading more indigenous narratives until I found one that spoke to me the way Plath did. I came across this sentiment from Max Wolf Valerio’s essay “It’s in My Blood, My Face—My Mother’s Voice, The Way I Sweat” that articulated my confliction perfectly:

> Just what is it to be an ‘Indian’… and more importantly, how do I… relate to it all? Well, sometimes I’ve made quite an occupation of thinking about it and sometimes, more recently, I’d rather not bother…. Yet—I cannot forget and I don’t want to. It’s in my blood, my face  my mother’s voice  it’s in my voice  my speech rhythms my dreams my memories  it’s the shape of my legs  and though I am light skinned it is my features—my eyes and face shape. (Valerio, 37)
Reading and writing were my outlets for retelling myself and my story, uncovering the silences and gaps in my own life. It was literature that connected me in that way, poetry that wrote down history I had only known about in dreams, like a fairytale I had once heard but knew couldn’t be real. Plath rekindled a narrative within me, one that I did not know how to articulate or even begin to understand until I crossed Valerio’s path, and then Churreáin’s.

By quoting Plath, Churreáin spoke my language, which drove me to discover and investigate hers. The more I read Churreáin’s collection, the more I began to draw parallels from my unwritten history to a lot of the history that has been wiped away from Ireland. My matriarchal history is particularly scattered and sheltered—I am so much of that side of my family, yet I am excluded and isolated from it. Literature raised questions in me I never even thought of asking. Was it out of shame or pure unknowingness that all of this was hidden from me? Moreover, how can I live in a world that has also been pulled away from me?

I take from this Mariana Ortega’s notion of the multiplicitious self. She contends that “the experience of the multiplicitious self as being-between-worlds and being-in-worlds is informed by intersecting social identities” (Ortega, 74). I am, at any given moment in time, a being who is stuck in a multitude of selves, of intersecting moments in time. One of those moments in time just happens to be silenced, hidden, sheltered away under layers of shame, forgetting and re-remembering, and above all, womanhood.

In this discovery, it struck me why Annemarie’s poems had seemed to reach beyond the page and pull me to them. Yes, they were beautiful. Yes, they had wonderful form and line breaks. Yes, they were lyrically sound. But more importantly, they gave recognition. They gave sounds and words and voices that I had never heard, and yet I felt understood because they were
my words in some ways, a secret diary I never knew was written, the way I felt when I read Plath and even more.

Although I have virtually no biological ties to Ireland’s silences and loss of history, I am born under the same vein. I had experienced the years of unknowingness, the familial silence that is rooted in and out of historical loss, and the feeling of being a woman throughout all of this, having zero ancestral ties that called me to my matriarchal roots; it was all encapsulated into something I could hold into my hands. Annemarie had managed to squeeze entire experiences and landscapes into just a few poems; she had given me something that I never knew I could have—language, understanding, and a root in history.

*The language I find you in is not the one you spoke, / you who taught me that to make a home is to make a sound / in the world, and be understood.*

My own life’s silences are not the main focus of this thesis. They are, however, vital for understanding why I chose this work and in what ways this collection helped me understand how to process and measure the silences that have occurred throughout my life. Processing requires recognition. A recognition of grief, of loss, of memory and the lack thereof. Historical processing takes time, and it wasn’t until I stumbled across this collection that my processing began to take place. Every gap on the pages was a manifestation of all the gaps within my life: my mother’s memory, women I never knew, history I could not trace, and above all, identities I felt I could not link.

Without my realizing it before, poetry and literature have been my vehicles for understanding myself in relation to the world around me. This is true for many people, for women in particular, but only Churreáin and Plath have ever been able to pull the words from my
mouth and materialize them, make them beautiful and heard, uncover my silences and make me real. And for that, I am forever grateful.

Beware. / Beware. / Out of ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air.
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ACADEMIC VITA

Kaylin D. Fussell

EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University—Schreyer’s Honors College
University Park, PA
The College of Liberal Arts | B.A. in English | B.A. in Philosophy: Law, Values, and Ethics | Class of May 2020

Study Abroad Summer 2018- “Representing the Irish Landscape, Literature and Visual Arts”

Relevant Coursework: The Politics of Science Fiction, Graphic Novels, Horror Fiction, Editorial Process

HONORS

Recipient of Barry Directorship Liberal Arts Enrichment Award

Dean’s List

Fall 2016 - Spring 2020

WORK EXPERIENCE

Acquisitions Intern
Penn State University Press
University Park, PA
June 2019 – May 2020

• Aided in the turnover process, creating castoffs, art inventories, art portfolios, and press obligations for EAs
• Vetted book proposals for series lists and reviewed manuscripts to ensure all requirements were met before turnover
• Drafted reader descriptions for reviewers and synopses of manuscripts for new project meetings and editorial committee meetings

Eisenbrauns Editorial Intern
Penn State University Press
University Park, PA
Jan 2020 – May 2020

• Coordinated closely with imprint’s editor and production to ensure timely turnover of materials
• Proofread and evaluated final manuscript copy to verify content aligned with press’ guidelines
• Streamlined communication and inquires between the authors and editor to allow for a smoother turnover process

Production Intern
Penn State University Press
University Park, PA
Sep 2019 – May 2020

• Researched copyrights, royalties, and other permission aspects for texts and images
• Prepared and inputted books for permission of copyright to the Library of Congress
• Monitored and entered business invoices from printers and copyeditors into FileMaker

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Alpha Delta Pi Sorority
University Park, PA
Director of Academic Affairs
Dec 2018 – Dec 2019

• Managed and facilitated academic improvement of chapter members who fell below minimum GPA
• Organized various career-based workshops to assist in members’ future goals
• Displayed timely communication methods with district, national, and chapter advisors

SKILLS