

To Not Die of History

Cherry Smyth

'We have poetry so that we do not die of history'

Meena Alexander (1)

Famished (Pindrop Press, 2019) is a book-length poem that explores the Irish Famine (1845-52) and how British imperialism helped cause mass starvation and the largest refugee crisis of the 19th century. The poem has also been developed as a 75-minute touring performance, devised in collaboration with a vocalist Lauren Kinsella and composer Ed Bennett, that draws on the power of collective lament, using music and expanded singing. Inspired by the current migrant crisis, which evokes the 'coffin ships' that crossed the Atlantic during the famine, *Famished* details the impact of mass starvation on women particularly and how famine followed the Union Jack. I realised through the research, that if the Famine happened now, the Irish would be in the boats, prevented from landing on the shores of the UK. We would likely be considered 'illegal', be detained and deported.

People ask how the project *Famished* started and, as poets know, there is rarely one defining moment but a series of nudges or prompts that can be sparked by an image, a sound, a word cluster, a political or emotional event that accrues density and texture

like threads of flax make a sheet of linen. I have traced one epiphanic moment back to 2012, when I noticed a poster on the London Underground for an exhibition about the life of Queen Victoria: 'Victoria Revealed: Meet the woman, wife and mother behind the crown.' Across the portrait of young Victoria by Thomas Sully, someone had scrawled the graffiti 'IRISH FAMINE' on her forehead. It struck me with the force of a slap. I looked around hoping to see the hero and felt the heat of recognition and belonging as my sense of having been cheated of my own history singed through me.

Since 1995, the centenary of the start of the Famine, there have been more than a hundred memorials erected from the Dublin quays to Boston and Sydney. Many of these bronze figurative sculptures are hijacked by a reactionary nationalism that tends to simplify the causes of the Famine and sometimes uses it to promote an ahistorical, essentialist Irish identity. Emily Mark-Fitzgerald urges, in her introduction to *The Great Irish Famine: Visual and Material Culture*, that those representing the Famine do not collapse categories of Famine experience into 'an undifferentiated notion of cultural trauma that ignores the specifics of time, place and agency.' (2) She asks if remembering can be seen as performative rather than reproductive, attesting that 'the past shifts in response to present concerns.' This recalls the distinction made by Balkan writer Svetlana Boym, between restorative nostalgia that wishes to return to the past and a reflective nostalgia that fears return. (3) Boym argues that restorative nostalgia is orientated towards historic preservation and can be instrumentalised for nationalism and war, while reflective nostalgia aims to co-create a better future. Aware of the sentimentalising view of the poet 'in exile', I also knew that some distance facilitated looking again at the most painful event in Anglo-Irish history and how the scale and horror of the Great Hunger still permeates the Irish psyche.

Despite being cautioned by some historians that silence did not follow the Famine, I would argue that bronze statues cannot speak. Many Irish people insist that there was no language to voice the ineffable for several generations after the event and still feel unable to discuss it openly. Irish and British school children are barely taught that more than 'doctrinaire neglect' caused the Famine when Ireland was part of Britain, and food was exported to England throughout its duration. A trip to Connemara will show you that Ireland remains one of the few places on earth that is less peopled than it was in the mid 19th century. How many know that the Irish were granted an £8 million government loan, while in the 1830s British slave owners were compensated to the tune of £20 million? And at the peak of the Famine, England rounded up 15,000 Irish paupers and sent them back to their deaths in Cork and Dublin.

Formally, the project was inspired by the concept of 'poetry of witness' coined by Carolyn Forché and developed in collections like *The Angel of History* and by the prose poem elements and accounts of racist microaggressions in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine. Working within a three-act structure, I interweave a variety of forms and registers from the traditional lyric, autobiography and historical quotation to nursery rhyme and lists. This polyvocal style allows multiple voices to have space and even contradict each other in the narrative. Many of us grew up with the counting rhyme 'One potato, two potato, three potato, four....', which takes on savage associations when used in the context of the potato blight. The shockingly dehumanising quotes from Westminster at the time interrupt the poetic skin of the text.

We have learnt that famines are not natural disasters, but political ones. The people of Yemen, Syria, Sudan and Somalia are starving because people in power are letting it happen. We are told shortages are caused by drought but in Yemen, where 20 million are starving, and people are eating leaves to survive, it's clearly weaponised hunger. In an essay in *Women and the Great Hunger*, Amy Martin argues that 'Dehumanisation is central to the experience of famine.' (4)

What is it to dehumanise? To make less than human and, in the case of the Irish Famine, to make less than animal, to clear Ireland of millions of peasants to make room for more profitable livestock to feed the rest of Britain. The Irish were demeaned as rats, 'white chimps', people 'emanating from potatoes' to reinforce Irish stupidity and English supremacy. At a time when the atavistic division between the Irish and the English is being revived through Brexit and the backstop issue of the border, it is painful to reconsider Britain's role in the catastrophe: it suited the English establishment to construct the Famine as sent by Providence to teach the Irish a moral lesson.

Against the 'exact' science of statistics is the conjectural science of the uncounted, the uncountable and the discounted. That's where poetry comes in. Poetry is a humanising force. It is a place to generate courage and to comprehend vastness of emotions or figures; figures of speech and which speech matters. It exists in the space between seeing and saying, knowing and showing the world, between the living and the dead. Just as a photograph of a glassy lake in Donegal tries to capture the multiple colours of the surrounding landscape the eye can see, a poem can only try to cohere fragments of memory and history into a different kind of living body, spoken and sung. As Aoife

Casby, writes in her brilliant short story /essay 'Famine: An Artwork', 'I want my dead ancestors to live in me. I long to touch, to grieve with history.' (5)

Famished was written to understand what numbers couldn't explain or contain: the 1.5 million dead, the 2 million forced to emigrate and the pre-Famine Irish population of 8.5 million that has never been reached again. I wanted to make the biggest migration of the 19th century speak to maritime migration now, to draw links between the Irish workhouses and today's detention centres and resist ideologies that continue to demonise the poor and the 'foreign'.

It is impossible to represent the immense suffering of the Famine but I have always been drawn to the body as subject, in response to patriarchy, sexuality, homophobia, racism, imperialism and AIDS. These issues continue to shape how we think about bodies haunted by discrimination, illness and objectification. How do I address them from, what poet Vahni Capildeo calls, this 'postcolonial body in a post-imperial place'?

(6) We are taught that speaking for those who can't may be interpreted as a kind of trespassing, an exploitation of the suffering of others. Nick Makoha, author of *Kingdom of Gravity*, a powerful and graphic poetry collection about Idi Amin's brutal regime in Uganda, asks how we approach traumatic histories without indulging in trauma. There are the doubtless dangers of fetishizing suffering and it's interesting to note that certain genres like history or anthropology are more self-justifying than making art or writing about traumatic events, which are often seen as an excessive luxury. (7)

Annie Dillard proposes in *The Writing Life* that, 'Writing every book, the writer must solve two problems: can it be done? And, can I do it?' (8) The poet exists in the gap

between creating and resisting. Perhaps it's like the seduction of dystopia – the compelling nature of the unbearable, the unspeakable. It is difficult to admit to this fascination with how we treat each other, when as a species we can be so cruel, so violent. We want to look away and keep looking to be able to stop looking for good. The ghosts – the Irish and the English ghosts – become human, become ourselves.

'Does sifting through damage ease or enshrine it?' Denise Riley asks in a poem written after her son's death. (9) As poets, we still must approach the fire with the awareness that it can either warm or burn us. There's always an element of risk and the fear of getting it wrong, speaking out of turn, or feeling unqualified to speak. When Jay Bernard felt compelled to write about a house fire in South London that killed 13 black teenagers in 1981, they found themselves asking, 'Who was I to dig this up again?' Bernard decided to eschew interviews with the families of the victims for the collection *Surge* because reportage felt like a 'safe method' and they wanted poetic freedom through a more symbolic meditation. It also felt increasingly unethical to approach people for material to write poetry. (10) However, the ethical complexities are worth navigating and acknowledging, as Toni Morrison attests in 'Peril': 'Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so cruel that ...only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination.' (11)

As well as the fear, there is undoubtedly a kind of desire to inhabit an unbearable yet captivating space. Jorie Graham addressed this paradox after 9/11 saying that the contradictions poetry allows let reality 'be as complex as it needs to be, as filled with contradiction as it needs to be. You can feel rage and curiosity and some form of respect and horror about the same event and your soul is only going to be larger for it.' (12)

Macy Todd puts it another way in his excellent essay 'A Discourse of Need: The Drive in the Contemporary Situation of Famine', 2015. He uses psychoanalysis to assess traces of aggression and pleasure in the discourse of famine. 'An understanding of famine must incorporate the body's desiring, linguistic ground.' He cites Lacan to suggest that the body 'enjoys itself by "corporising" the body in a signifying way'. This, Todd explains, means that to represent the psyche through bodily impulses like language and gesture gives us pleasure. Aoife Casby in her desire to hold a starvation dinner party to 'experience the catastrophe of history' is trying to grasp the horror through ritual and the symbolic. 'The symbolic was a vague idea before it became vital. The symbolic: an implicit part of the future.' (13) The symbolic retrieves meaning from the past, even if the symbol cannot hold, the dinner party can never be performed, yet delivers something that survives into the future: the idea and the act of writing it, from vagueness to vitality.

In Taryn Simon's 'An Occupation of Loss', 2016, (14) the artist employs professional mourners to play out 'a version of grief'. Their sonic mourning includes northern Albanian laments, which seek to excavate 'uncried words'; Greek laments from Epirus, which bind the story of a life with its afterlife; and Yezidi laments, which map displacement and exile. It demonstrates that grief can be performative and asks does mourning need to be witnessed by others in order to be considered 'real'.

What I discovered through writing *Famished* was that the process would not be completed by a published book alone. I knew that I needed to expand the singular experience of reading a book towards the joy and accompanying effect of collaboration

and the need for a long uninterrupted form to create a public, performative lament rather than a solo poem and a solo cry. I wanted the musical element of lament to scaffold the poems and for the female voice to evoke the traditional role of women keening during Irish wakes. I was also looking for a more collective and a fuller cultural response to the shamed and shocked silence around this Famine and its aftermath, and other famines, such as famines in India and Africa. The performance granted the performative aspect of memory as well as the witnessed act of mourning.

I usually build up a collection from a series of loosely linked poems, whereas a sustained book-length poem required greater perseverance, self-belief and research. I was dogged by the fear that I wouldn't be strong enough to keep looking in the Famine's terrifying face. When I decided that the work should be publicly performed with music, it moved from elegy to lament, to protest song, with words and wordless singing working together to conjure different boundaries of grief, to hallow the harrowing and to try to address different geographies of hunger, then and now. Through the performances, I started to see myself as the narrator; Lauren, the vocalist, as embodying the emotional resonances through expanded singing; and Ed, the composer, providing the sonic contours. I've had unexpected pleasure from being part of the fluid process of improvisation which is key to Lauren's music practice and from witnessing the poem being experienced in a more sensory way through live transmission. Lauren's improvised garbled growling in response to the horror began to sound like, as one spectator put it, the blight talking to itself, and also to invoke not only the cadences of lost Gaelic but the rhythms of other threatened world languages. The effect of Ed's immersive score, which includes field recordings of Irish landscapes and seascapes, is to allow the silent pauses in the piece to resonate more profoundly.

The other aspect of collaboration that was novel for me was to work with translators. Four million spoke Irish before the Famine, a number that fell to two million afterwards. When I learnt that the British government distributed information in English on flyers that fewer than half could read, and that most people who died were Gaelic speakers, it was important to honour that. Irish-speaking poet Aifric MacAodha and writer Aoife Casby have translated a poem each for the final collection and the performance. Again, the aural rendition of the poems in Irish acts as a visceral echo for those who learnt and lost their Irish and those who were denied the chance to learn it at all. Being the latter, I realised, through working with Aifric and Aoife, how language loss had impoverished my connection with my own land and its naming. One land, two countries. That split also runs through me.

Artist Michael Rakovitz talks about his work with homelessness as ‘the idea of a bandage, something that heals a wound while also enabling people to see the wounded. We normally try to make the homeless disappear from view.’ (15) The Famine disappeared from view yet won’t die. Famine is my ancestor. It carries the shame of survival as well as the shame of having been made de-human. We were taught shame’s lesson well. I betray my well-taught ancestors by summoning that shame. *Famished* is an unfixed, growing, anti-monument to the tragic consequences of British cultural supremacy. It also aims to heal. I learnt recently that the Irish word for ‘healing’, *‘Íceach’*, shares its roots with the word for ‘planting.’ This did not surprise me: words as seeds, poems as crops.

Is the live performance a cooling for the inflammation of shame? Does air help? Does breath transform suffering in our attempts to vocalise grief? Vietnamese Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that, 'When we practice mindful breathing to know how to recognise, embrace and transform our pain, we do it for them (our ancestors) as well as for us. Then we can heal not only our own suffering and that of our ancestors but we can also avoid transmitting this suffering to our loved ones, to our children, and their children.' (16)

Those who can't feel shame are said to lack mercy. Mercy requires empathy. The Irish were portrayed as indolent and deserving the 'natural' justice of starvation. Empathy for the Irish was seen as unpatriotic, and still is. In a profound and radical insight into the current right wing contempt for empathy, Jay Bernard argues that, 'To speak empathetically is to betray the nation; to present the "foreign-looking" or "foreign-sounding" person as worthy of love is to undermine the tacit acceptance of white English supremacy and its predication on the oppression of others.' (17)

In addressing questions that history had been asking for some time I found answers that are sharply relevant to today. Being more aware of the role of British colonialism in starving the Irish people, forcing them to flee in huge numbers and decimating the native language, has also brought into painful relief how these ideologies are currently being used to dispossess, dominate and reject the 'other'. As Nisha Ramayya attests, 'Colonial history remains undigested in Britain and undigested matter repeats itself.' (18)

I will end with a short poem by Paul Celan, whose family were killed in the Holocaust and who disarticulated despair and its resistance so powerfully.

I gave a chance
to your, even your
ill-rung shadow,

I bestoned
it, even it, with what's
true-shadowed, true-
rung of mine – a
six-pointed star
to which you gave your silence,

today,
take your silence where you will,

strewing things timeunderhallowed,
long enough, I too, in the street,
I am bound, no heart to embrace,
for home, out into
the stony many. (19)

- (1) Alexander, Meena, 'Question Time' from *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2013)
- (2) Mark-Fitzgerald, Emily, Frawley, O. & Corporaal, M. eds. *The Great Irish Famine: Visual and Material Culture* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018)
- (3) Boym, Svetlana, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001)
- (4) Martin, Amy, in *Women and the Great Hunger*, eds. Kinealy, King & Reilly (Hamden, CT: Quinnipiac University Press, 2016) p.158
- (5) Casby, Aoife, 'Famine: an Artwork' in *The Stinging Fly*, Winter 2017-18
- (6) Capildeo, Vahni, quoted in 'Threads' by Nisha Ramayya, *Poetry London* Spring 2018
- (7) Makoha, Nick, from a panel at the *Uses of Lament Symposium*, University of Greenwich, February 9, 2019
- (8) Dillard, Annie, *The Writing Life* (New York: HarperPerennial; 1990)
- (9) Riley, Denise, 'And Another Thing', from *Say Something Back* (London: Picador, 2016)
- (10) Bernard, Jay, from a panel at the *Uses of Lament Symposium*, University of Greenwich, February 9, 2019
- (11) Morrison, Toni, 'Peril', from *Mouth Full of Blood* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), p.ix
- (12) Graham, Jorie, *The Guardian* Interview, Dec 01, 2017
- (13) Casby, Aoife, 'Famine: an Artwork' in *The Stinging Fly*, Winter 2017-18

- (14) Simon, Taryn, 'An Occupation of Loss', 2016, shown in various venues including Artangel, London, 2018
- (15) Michael Rakovitz, *Art Monthly* Interview, May 2018
- (16) Nhat Hanh, Thich, *No Mud, No Lotus: The Art of Transforming Suffering* (California: Parallax Press, 2014)
- (17) Bernard, Jay, 'Surge' from *Beacon of Hope* (London: New Beacon Books, 2016) p.57
- (18) Ramayya, Nisha, 'Threads', *Poetry London*, Spring 2018
- (19) Celan, Paul, 'I gave a chance', from *Snow Part* (New York: The Sheep Meadow Press, 2007)

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